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MAGAZINE

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VOL. 3 AUGUST, 1950 NO. 1

BLAZING FEATURE NOVEL

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Two cowpunchers of disaster rode under the black brand of midnight murderers.

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Half-breed John Cameron figured that he was doomed for life.

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RANGE OF RIDDLES . . . . . **Bennett Foster** 102

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MAN OF MYSTERY

Silent Sitting Bull found his gold mine—in a cloud of mystery.

By L. C. Davis

"COME and get me!" With those words Sitting Bull, Sioux chieftain, flung down the gauntlet to the Federal Government in the summer of 1876 when the latter ordered his tribe out of the Big Horn country.

The government accepted the challenge and three columns of troops converged upon the Sioux encampment on the Little Big Horn. One was led by General Crook, who was based at Ft. Reno. He proceeded northward. Another, headed by General Terry, left Fort Lincoln and proceeded westward, while a third left Ft. Buford, under the command of General Gibbon, traveling down the Yellowstone.

The rest is history. General George Custer, who has attached to Terry's command, "jumped the gun" and his entire detachment was wiped out before help could arrive.

"Custer was a fool!" Sitting Bull grunted. "He attacked us. What else could we do but defend ourselves?"

Thus the name of the Sioux medicine man sprang into prominence over night and conjectures ran rampant as to his true identity. "Who is Sitting Bull?" they asked. "Who were his ancestors?"

(Please continue on page 8)

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MAX BRAND'S WESTERN

(Continued from page 6)

"Where did he come from?" "Is he a full blooded Indian or could he be a half breed?"

Army men of that period declared that he was at one time a cadet at West Point, and that the dark-skinned youth, who had a high scholastic standing, was denied a diploma only because he couldn't stay out of trouble. That was in the years 1846-48, and a few years later other army men reported they saw "Bison," as he was known because of his physique, living in New Mexico with the Gila Apaches.

All of this speculation, however, led to a statement in the newspapers by a citizen of Huntsville, Mo., who declared the man in question was Bison McLean of Randolph County, Missouri, and that he was appointed to West Point by Representative Thomas Hart Benton. The dates checked, and that settled the matter.

Sitting Bull's picture appeared often in the newspapers after the Custer Massacre and old traders and mountain men who saw it, or who chanced to see him in person in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, had other theories.

"Why, that's Charlie Jacobs!" one old-timer averred. "He's the half-breed son of Henry Jacobs, the interpreter. Knew old Henry well!"

"Yep! He went to school at St. John's College," reminisced another. "Graduated, too, I hear. Didn't he go to Toronto University after that?"

The medicine man grunted assent in some particulars and admitted that he "got around" in his younger days; that he came from Prairie du Chien and went to school at Fort Garry. Questioned on another occasion he gave Fort George on Willow Creek as his birthplace, but when he was a fugitive from the United States,

(Please continue on page 130)

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Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens were cowpunchers of disaster—riding under the black brand of midnight murderers.

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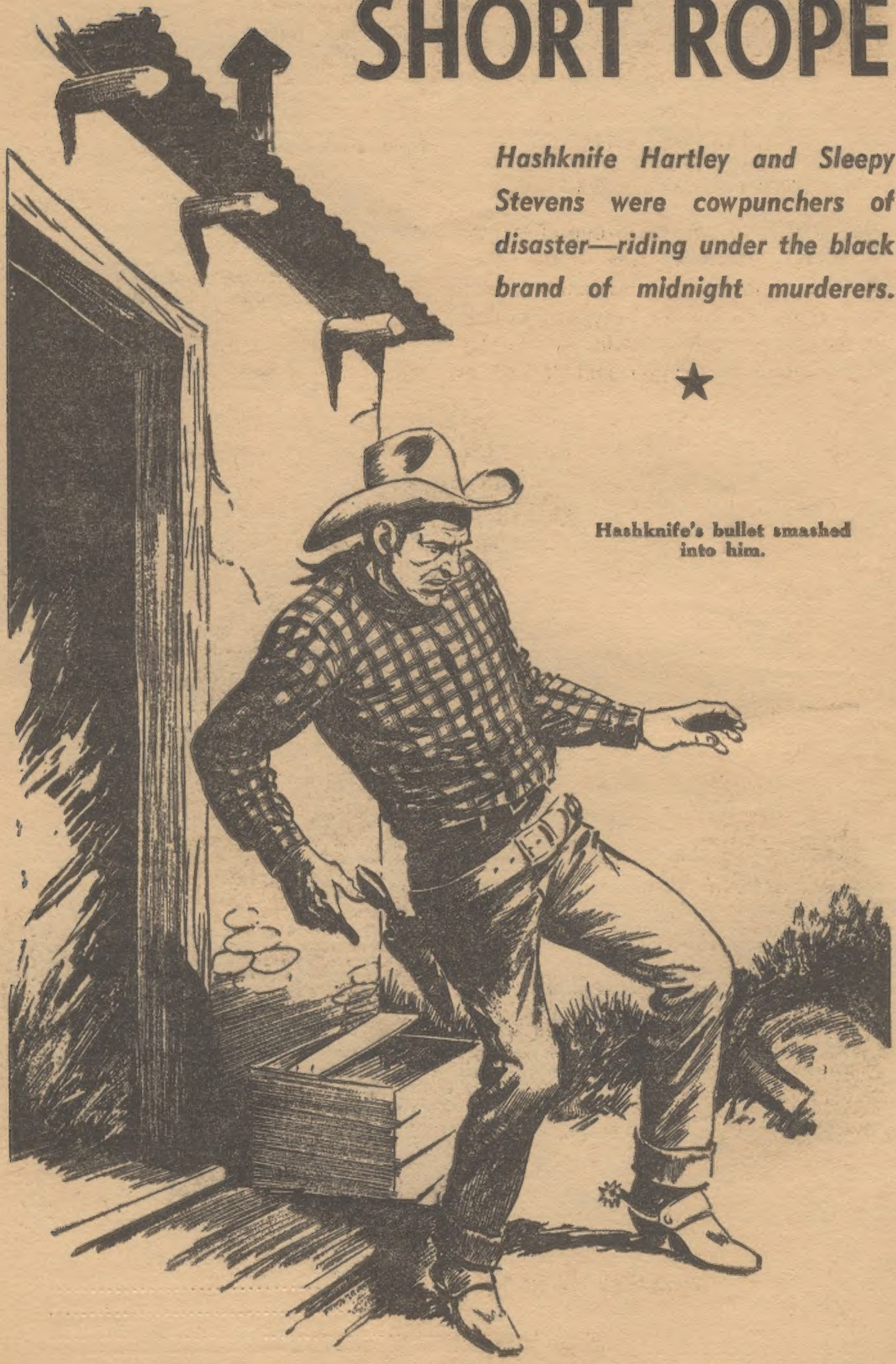

Hashknife's bullet smashed into him.

FOR RUSTLERS

CHAPTER ONE

Word from Agua Frio

IT WAS a weathered group of loading corrals near a tiny town in the desert hills, heat-scourged, without a breath of air to drive away the heavy pall of dust caused by the milling cattle. A creaking train of cattle cars rattled and clanked, as it spotted the next car at the loading-chute.

From somewhere in the dust a cowboy was singing huskily:

Good-by, little dogies, don't you cry;
You'll be canned-beef by and by.

The raucous voices of dust-hoarse cowboys, as they forced the frightened cattle

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Smashing Novel of Colt-Swinging Cowboys

By W. C. Tuttle

up the chute and into the cars; an occasional vitrolic curse, when things did not go right. A tally man on the top pole of the corral, almost obscured in the dust, which eddied up around him. Outside the corral fence stood the dead-tired broncs, heads hanging listlessly.

A bare-headed man, wearing a once-white shirt, climbed up beside the tallyman, asked a question, and the tallyman, after peering around, pointed down into the corrals at a tall cowboy who had gone to unbar a gate. The man, who was the depot-agent, climbed down, dodged some milling cattle and reached the man at the gate.

"Your name is Hartley?" he asked.

The tall, lean-faced cowboy squinted his dust-filled eyes at the agent for a moment, before nodding curtly.

"I've got a telegram for Henry Hartley, Box 48 outfit."

Hashknife Hartley rubbed a grimy sleeve across his face, before accepting the telegram, which he stuffed deep in his pocket. The agent turned, dodged away from some cattle, and climbed up to the top of the fence beside the tallyman.

"Cowboys gettin' telegrams, eh?" grunted the tallyman.

"That's right. Never even read it."

"Darn good cowhand," said the tallyman. "Wish the old man would keep him and his pardner. Only been with us a month."

"They come and go, I reckon. Well, I've ate all the dust I need."

The agent climbed down and went ambling back to his little depot, and the dusty brakeman highballed the engineer to move up one more car length. Only six more cars to fill, and the shipment would be finished, extra men paid off. The lone bartender in the little town would be freshly shaved, his bar polished, in anticipation of the usual celebration.

Hashknife Hartley met his partner Sleepy Stevens outside the corral. While Hashknife was several inches over six feet in height, Sleepy was short and broad of shoulder, with a grin-wrinkled face and innocent blue eyes. Hashknife's face was long, deeply lined, his nose generous, his mouth wide. While folks might forget Hashknife's face, no one had ever forgotten his eyes. They were always the clear gray tint of steel, and they seemed to look straight through into the soul of things. One glance from his eyes, and a perfectly good lie often died unborn.

Big Jim Black, owner of the Box 48, came up to them a sheaf of currency in his hand, and paid them for their work.

"Yo're a good pair of cowmen," he told them genially. "I wish I had a place for yuh on the Box 48."

"Well, we're much obliged for the short job, Mr. Black," smiled Hashknife. "You feed well and yuh know how cows should be handled. If we ever come through this country again, we'll drop in and sample yore kitchen."

"You'll shore be welcome," laughed Black, and went on the pay off the rest of the extra men.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy mounted and rode over to the one hotel in the town where they were able to buy a bath and a shave. Clean once more and with a change of clothing, they went to a little restaurant to get a meal. It was here that Hashknife read his telegram, and shoved it across to Sleepy. It was from Agua Frio, signed by a Henry Alden, and read:

Look for letter at Vacaville.

Sleepy scratched his nose and squinted at Hashknife, who folded up the telegram and shoved it deep in a hip-pocket.

"Well?" queried Sleepy curiously.

"Depot agent brought it over to the loadin' corral a while ago," said Hashknife.

"Sounds queer," said Sleepy. "Didja

ever heard of a man named Henry Alden?"

"Never did. And why should he write me at Vacaville?"

"It's about thirty miles over to Vacaville."

"Yeah. Well, we might as well eat. No use tryin' to work a puzzle here, with the answer thirty miles away."

"Why didn't he write you here at Arroyo City?"

Hashknife shook his head thoughtfully.

"Mebbe," he said quietly, "they've got a nicer post office in Vacaville. Some folks are particular thataway, pardner. Anyway, we have never been in Vacaville."

"Nor in Agua Frio," added Sleepy. "Agua Frio means cold water. Well, that's better than bein' in hot water. Here comes our eggs."

While they were eating, Ed Wells, the sheriff, came in and sat down with them. Wells was a big, uncouth, unshaven person, possibly forty years of age, addicted to poker and strong drink.

"Well, yuh got 'em all loaded, eh?" he said. "Awful hot t'day, and that dust was thick. Betcha them cows shrunk forty pounds apiece."

"Same here," grinned Sleepy. "My waist got so small that my belt fell off twice."

"I'll betcha. Oh, I've sweat my share in a loadin' corral, before I was elected sheriff of this county."

"You've got an easy job now," remarked Hashknife. "Big Jim was tellin' me that yuh never have any crime in this county."

"That's right. I shore clamp down on 'em—hard. You boys leavin'?"

"In the mornin'," replied Hashknife. "We only hired out for the one month—helpin' the Box 48 on this big shipment."

"Uh-huh. Goin' up through Vacaville?"

"Well, we ain't decided about that, Sheriff. Yuh never can tell about us—and neither can we."

"Like to drift, eh?" The sheriff twisted aside to allow the waiter to place his food on the table.

"We kinda like to see the country," replied Hashknife.

"Kinda like what they call soldiers of fortune, eh?"

"Cowpunchers of disaster," corrected Sleepy.

The sheriff nodded gravely. It is doubtful if he knew what disaster meant. Hashknife finished his coffee and drew out the makings of a cigaret.

"Have yuh ever been at Agua Frio, Sheriff?" he asked.

"Agua Frio? Well, I was down there a couple years ago. It's right on the Border—closer than this place is. Not bein' in my county, I never have any cause to go down there. Have yuh ever been there?"

"No. Yuh don't happen to know Henry Alden, do yuh?"

"At Agua Frio? Henry Alden. Well, I don't exactly know him, but I know he owns the Seventy-Three outfit down there. Pretty big outfit, I reckon. Thinkin' of goin' to Agua Frio, are yuh?"

"Hadn't thought about it," replied Hashknife.

They paid for their meal and went up to the little hotel, where they engaged a room for the night. There was plenty of activity at the Arroya Saloon across the street, where the big crew of punchers sought action for their hard-earned money.

It was after dark, when Hashknife and Sleepy joined the crowd at the saloon, where there were several poker games in progress. Wells, the sheriff, was there, watching the games, and came up to Hashknife near the doorway.

"Some of the boys are rollin' 'em high," he remarked casually.

"They seem to be," smiled Hashknife. He stepped outside for a breath of air, and as he did so he saw Big Jim Black enter the rear of the saloon. The sheriff

followed Hashknife out on the sidewalk.

"Pretty hot in there," remarked the sheriff. "And that smoke gits so thick yuh could cut it with a knife."

"Those old tin-roof buildin's sure store up heat," agreed Hashknife.

AT THE corner of the saloon was a long hitch-rack filled with saddled horses. Hashknife heard a man speak to one of the horses, and turned his head just in time to see the flash of a six-shooter, followed by a choking cry.

"What the hell!" blurted the sheriff, and started for the hitch-rack.

At the corner Hashknife and the sheriff parted, each of them taking a separate side of the rack. Hashknife heard a man running, when the sheriff demanded to know what was going on. The horses were lurching, kicking up dust, and Hashknife almost fell over the body of a man, lying on the ground.

He stopped sharply and turned. There was a white package on the ground several feet away from the body. Hashknife swept it up, felt the thickness of it, and shoved it inside his shirt. The sheriff had circled the rack, when Hashknife called:

"Here he is, Sheriff."

"Somebody shot?" the sheriff gasped. Men were coming from the saloon, crowding around as Hashknife knelt down there in the darkness, the sheriff bending over him.

"I'm afraid they got him cold," said Hashknife quietly.

Big Jim crowded in, questioning the sheriff who ordered the man taken into the saloon. He sent one of the men to get a doctor. They laid the cowboy out on the saloon floor. He was a man about thirty years of age, thin-faced, medium height.

"A doctor won't do him any good," said Hashknife. "Anybody know who he is?"

There was a silence.

No one seemed to know the man. Hashknife turned to Big Jim. "Ever see him before, Mr. Black?" he asked.

Big Jim's face was a stony mask, as he slowly shook his head. "Prob'ly a drifter," he said coldly. Hashknife scanned the faces of the crowd. "Any of you fellers seen him around here this evenin'?"

The cowboys looked at each other, but no one volunteered any information.

"Where were you when he was shot, Hartley?" asked Big Jim.

"Out in front, talkin' with the sheriff," replied Hashknife. "I saw the flash of the shot."

"That's right," agreed the sheriff quickly.

The doctor came and made a quick examination.

"Killed instantly," he said.

"Might be somethin' in his pockets to identify him," said Hashknife.

"I'll take care of that," replied the sheriff. "We'll take him down to Doc's place."

After this was done the games were resumed in a half-hearted way. The murder had taken away all their zest for poker and whiskey. Hashknife and Sleepy went to their room at the hotel before the sheriff came back.

Hashknife drew the blinds on their windows, took the package from his pocket and looked it over. It was a legal-sized envelope of heavy material, sealed, and the contents were very bulky.

"What have yuh got?" queried Sleepy.

"Somethin' that either the killer or the killed must have dropped near the hitch-rack," replied Hashknife. "It was only a few feet from the body. I tucked it away, before I thought."

Hashknife took his knife blade and worked the flap loose. The envelope was filled with currency of large denomination, which he proceeded to count carefully, while Sleepy watched him, wide-eyed.

"Twenty-two hundred dollars," announced Hashknife quietly.

"I'd never have believed it," said the awe-struck Sleepy.

"Never believed what?" queried Hashknife.

"That there was that much money in the whole world. Well, I'll believe anythin' I hear after this."

Hashknife replaced the money in the envelope, laid it on the bed and sat down to roll a smoke. Sleepy sat down in a chair and waited for Hashknife to start a conversation.

"Twenty-two hundred dollars, layin' in the dust," mused Hashknife. "Nobody knows the dead cowboy—and that's a lot of money for a cowpuncher to be carryin' around, Sleepy."

"Yeah, it would be. That'd be a lot of money for a millionaire to be packin' around. But this might be what happened, Hashknife. A millionaire wants to kill off that puncher, but he wants the boy to have a decent burial; so he leaves twenty-two hundred layin' there."

"Well, that's an idea, Sleepy," agreed Hashknife soberly. "All we have to do is find a kind-hearted killer, with millions. Ought to be a simple matter in this country."

"We?" queried Sleepy. "We ain't got nothin' to do with it."

"We've got the funeral money."

"Yeah—and if the law starts lookin' for stolen money—and finds we've got it—"

"Sleepy, the man who killed him won't be lookin' for it—and the dead cowboy ain't interested."

"You mean we'll keep all of it, Hashknife?"

"Until we find the owner, pardner."

HASHKNIFE smoked thoughtfully for several minutes, finally got to his feet and went over to a table, where he picked up an old magazine. Opening his pocket-knife, he proceeded to cut the magazine in three sections, while Sleepy watched him curiously.

Then he removed the money from the envelope, replaced it with the magazine cuttings, and sealed the flap.

"I've got a hunch that somebody is lookin' for that envelope, Sleepy," he said, as he stuffed the money inside his shirt. "We'll stroll down by the rack, toss the envelope in the dust and then kinda stick around and see who gets it."

"And lose a lot of sleep for nothin'," complained Sleepy, as he drew on his boots. "You have some wonderful ideas, but parts are missin' in this one. Whoever is lookin' for money has prob'ly dug up all the dust around that hitch-rack thirty minutes ago."

"Maybe," smiled Hashknife. "But I'd rather have it proved to me." Sleepy finished dressing. Hashknife had the envelope in his hand as he opened their door, but dropped it as he jerked back when the muzzle of a six-shooter collided with his belt-buckle. Two masked men surged through the doorway, and the second one had a gun against Sleepy's midriff.

"Smart pair, eh?" gritted one of the men. "Open yore yap, and I'll close it for keeps. Where's that envelope? Quick! Don't—"

"It's there—on the floor!" exclaimed the one who had backed the surprised Sleepy against the wall.

"Back up!" snapped the man, and Hashknife obeyed. The man stooped, careful not to take his eyes off Hashknife, and secured the envelope. With a grunt of satisfaction he backed to the doorway.

"C'mon," he said to his companion. "I've got it."

Slowly the other man backed away from Sleepy to the doorway. One of them glanced sharply down the dark hallway and said quietly, "All clear."

The door banged shut, leaving Hashknife and Sleepy looking at each other. They heard the quick rustle of footsteps, as the two men left the hotel via the rear stairway.

"Jist like that," remarked Sleepy soberly, snapping his fingers.

"That's right," agreed Hashknife. "No fuss, perfect gentlemen. I'd say that the boys know their business."

"To the manner born," said Sleepy. Hashknife grinned slowly.

"You read that," he said.

"I know it—and I've been waitin' for a chance to use it. Well?"

Hashknife shrugged his shoulders, walked over and fastened and bolted the door.

"I reckon we might as well go to bed, Sleepy. There's no use of us worryin' about that envelope any longer—it's gone."

"Yeah, that's all right—but wait'll they open it. They'll know we fixed up the dummy."

"I wouldn't bet on that," grinned Hashknife. "It's my guess that them two fellers just thought there was real money in that envelope. They may blame somebody else for the double-cross."

"I hope so," sighed Sleepy. "They shore acted like they knew which end of the gun to hold in their hand—and it's a long road to Vacaville."

It was a long road to Vacaville, but no one molested them. That morning they had talked with the sheriff, who said there was no reason for them to stay for the inquest, so they rode away early.

VACAVILLE, on a railroad, was a much larger town than Arroyo City, but of the same type. They went straight to the post office, where Hashknife got the letter. It was brief and very much to the point.

Since wiring you conditions have changed and I won't need you. I hope that this has not been an inconvenience. Thanking you just the same, I beg to remain

Very truly yours,
Henry Alden.

"Well," sighed Sleepy, "he ain't the first man who ever changed his mind, Hashknife."

"No, that's true, pardner," replied Hashknife. "But it still makes me wonder how Henry Alden knew we was at Arroyo City, and why he sent the wire. We don't even know him. I wonder what condition has changed, which would make him sidetrack us here.

"It don't make sense," agreed Sleepy.

"Wait a minute," said Hashknife. He took out the telegram and the letter, examining the date-mark on each.

"I forgot to look at the date on that telegram, Sleepy," he said. "It must have been in Arroyo City a whole day, before it was delivered. It's marked June 14th, and the letter is marked June 16th. Well, I reckon conditions could change in a couple days. How about lookin' for a place where they retail grub?"

At the restaurant Hashknife asked a waiter about Agua Frio, and how to get there.

"Well, yuh ride a horse or ride the stage," smiled the buck-toothed waiter. "It's thirty miles southeast of here. There's a stage each way every day. Leaves here at seven o'clock in the mornin'."

There was part of a Phoenix paper on the table, and Hashknife looked it over idly, while their meal was being prepared. Suddenly he grunted softly, his eyes narrowed, as he read a few paragraphs.

"Here's one that'll make yuh fight yore hat, Sleepy," he said quietly. "This is dated June fifteenth, and it's from Agua Frio. It says that yesterday the body of Henry Alden, local cattleman, was found dead on the road between his ranch and town. All indications point to the fact that he was thrown from his horse and dragged to death."

"Lovely dove!" grunted Sleepy. "He telegraphed you on that day—and—how could he write you a letter on the sixteenth, if he was dead on the fourteenth?"

"Henry Alden," replied Hashknife soberly, "must have been a wonderful man. Here comes the ham and eggs."

CHAPTER TWO

Branded by the 73

THEY went to a little hotel and registered in the dog-eared register as Jim and Bill Smith from Douglas, after which they wandered around the town. About eight o'clock that evening as they walked past the hotel entrance they came face to face with Nick Starr, a gambler well known to both of them. He was with two other men, both strangers to Hashknife and Sleepy.

The tall gambler looked straight at both of them but gave no sign of recognition, passing quickly on with the other men. Hashknife and Sleepy stepped into the hotel entrance, looking after the three men who entered a saloon further down the street.

"Nick's eyesight must be gettin' poor," remarked Sleepy. Hashknife rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He and Sleepy had known Starr for several years, and they knew that Starr was a square-shooter.

"Mebbe he had a reason for not recognizin' us, Sleepy," said Hashknife. Somethin' is wrong, or Starr wouldn't act like that. I wonder what's in the wind."

They walked into the hotel and started toward the stairs, when the proprietor called to them.

"Which one of you gents is Jim Smith?" he asked.

"I'm Jim," smiled Hashknife. The proprietor held out an envelope. "This was left here on the counter jist after you fellers went out," he said. "It's for you, I reckon."

Hashknife thanked him, accepted the envelope, and they went up to their room where Hashknife quickly opened it. Inside was a single sheet of paper, on which was penciled the following brief message.

I saw you in Arroyo City, and Henry Alden was my friend. Keep on being Jim Smith and forget Agua Frio. Destroy this note at once and forget that I wrote it.

Nick Starr

Hashknife read it aloud to Sleepy, and

Hashknife Hartley

they looked keenly at each other for several moments.

"Starr saw us in Arroyo City—and told Alden," said Hashknife. "It begins to look as though Henry Alden wasn't killed by his horse."

"And," added Sleepy, "they're aimin' to hang our shirts on the same bush."

"Yeah, it looks thataway. Hmmmm," Hashknife glanced at the letter again. "Keep on bein' Jim Smith—and forget Agua Frio. Plain enough. Somebody is expectin' us in Vacaville, and they figure Starr will recognize us."

"Also meanin'," added Sleepy, "that Agua Frio is one of them places where angels fear to tread."

"I believe yo're right, Sleepy."

Hashknife's smile was enigmatic, as he looked at the sober face of his partner.

"Goin' down there," muttered Sleepy, turning away. "Well—nothin' to win and everythin' to lose. What more warnin' would anybody need, I wonder?"

"I wonder," said Hashknife quietly.

They had crossed many a hill together, these two, in their years of rambling the rangeland. Hashknife Hartley, christened Henry, son of an itinerant minister of Montana, had learned the cattle business early in life before he drifted down the ranges to the famous old outfit, which gave him his nickname.

Here he met Sleepy Stevens, whose right name was David, another of the tribe who can't stay still. And together they had started drifting. Here today, gone tomorrow, always wondering what might be on the other side of the hill. They might stop and work for a month, but the urge to keep moving was too strong, and they would pass along.

HASHKNIFE had been born with a mind as keen as his eyes, and any hint of a mystery seemed a direct challenge to him. Where range detectives failed, Hashknife, with bull-dog determination and the ability to build mountains from mole-hills, would succeed. He and Sleepy were in demand by the cattle associations, but refused to work for them, except when it suited Hashknife and Sleepy. Sleepy did not seek clues, nor did he analyze evidence. His job was to go along with Hashknife—and have his gun handy.

Their life had made them fatalists. Death often struck at them in strange ways. They never knew when to expect it. Many times it had flamed at them from canyon walls, from the thick mesquite beside the trails and from smoke-hazy saloons and gambling houses, and they came out unscathed.

Neither of them were split-second gunmen; they took the full time allowance—and shot straight. Their life was devoted to drifting and helping out some poor devil who might be getting a bad deal. That was why Sleepy had called them "Cowpunchers of Disaster."

Now they were facing another mystery, and Sleepy knew how it was affecting Hashknife. He sat there on the edge of the bed, slowly smoking a cigaret, his eyes narrowed, a scowl on his forehead.

"Yuh see," explained Sleepy, "we didn't know Henry Alden. If he wants to kill himself by fallin' off a horse on Friday, and then send us a letter on Sunday—it's all right with us. You understand that, don'tcha, Hashknife?"

"Yeah, I know," said Hashknife quietly.

"And," continued Sleepy, after drawing a deep breath, "after a man's dead—yuh can't help him none. It ain't possible. And if me or you get ourselves killed off we ain't helped Henry Alden nor each other. The set is busted, that's all. You sabe that don'tcha?"

"Yeah, that's right, Sleepy."

"And if we both git killed off—who benefits, outside of the undertaker? The whole damn thing is ridiculous, Hashknife. It's like slidin' in against a circular saw—tryin' to see if yore skin is tougher than steel. It ain't. Starr's warnin' is good enough for me. It ain't goin' to gripe me none to keep on bein' Bill Smith—and forget Agua Frio. I feel that we'd be the biggest pair of danged fools on earth to go down there, after that note. Anyway, it's none of our business. What do you think?"

Hashknife lifted his head and looked quickly at Sleepy.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I said," replied Sleepy dryly, "I won-

dered how soon we was goin' to start for Agua Frio."

"Midnight."

"Tonight, at midnight?"

"Yeah. Horses been fed and rested. We'll drag off the boots and sleep a few hours. Take us five, six hours to make the ride. No hurry. I wonder what's goin' on down there?"

"Well," said Sleepy, "I dunno what's been goin' on down there, but they might be buryin' a couple of nosey cowpunchers down there about next week."

"Well, that's somethin' to look forward to, Sleepy. Let's take on a little shut-eye."

ROCKY HILL waked down the corridor of the Agua Frio jail ahead of Sheriff Ira Bradley and entered the sheriff's office, where Pinky Caldwell, the deputy, sprawled in a chair, his feet on the sheriff's desk.

Rocky was twenty-one, slender, lithe; a good-looking young cowboy, with devil-may-care eyes and a thin-lipped smile. Pinky, with great effort, lifted one hand in a lazy salute and let the hand drop. It was Pinky's siesta hour, and he took full advantage of it, closing his eyes at once.

"Well, that's the situation, Rocky," said the sheriff. "Ma Alden said she wouldn't pros'cute yuh. She took it up with the law, and they said to turn yuh loose. Yo're loose."

Rocky Hill had been arrested for misbranding one of Henry Alden's 73 cows. That is, a 73 brand had been vented, and Rocky's Circle H stamped on the cow. Since Henry Alden had died, Ma Alden refused to prosecute.

Rocky smiled thinly. "It's a good thing I was in jail when it happened, or they'd accuse me of killin' Hank Alden."

Pinky Caldwell opened one eye, looked at Rocky and shut the eye again.

"That's right," he whispered.

"Jist like a damn Alabama coon hound," remarked the sheriff. "I'd rather have a liar than a lazy man around."

"Yuh got both," breathed Pinky. "Lemme alone—I'm dreamin'."

The sheriff shoved Pinky's feet aside and opened a drawer of his desk from which he secured a belt, holster and Colt .45. He handed them to Rocky, who quickly belted the gun around his narrow hips.

"I've been kinda lookin' after yore place, Rocky," said the sheriff. "Locked the house up, and I've been waterin' the loose stock."

"I have, yuh mean," whispered Pinky.

"I ordered yuh to do it, Goldilocks."

"Gosh!" groaned Pinky, hauling his feet off the desk and reaching for his battered sombrero. "Feller might's well try to sleep in a b'iler fact'ry. I-ree, you can make more noise'n any sheriff I ever knowed."

Pinky Caldwell was well over six feet in height, angular, rawboned, with a homely, freckled face and faded red hair, which was actually pink in color. Ira Bradley was short and fat, with a moon-like face and a tired-looking mustache. It dropped over the corners of his mouth and fluttered when he talked.

Pinky stood up, braced both hands on the desk and closed his eyes again.

"Was yuh out last night, Pinky?" queried Rocky, grinning.

"Last night? Lemme see. That was Wednesday night, wasn't it? Yeah, I was out. Went down to El Caballero—to a dance. What a orchestry Flash Rodriguez has got down there! Two murderers, two horse-thieves and a forger. They shore play pretty."

"Keep on goin' down there," said the sheriff, "and you'll wake up some mornin' with yore throat cut. Any time I make love to one of them honkatonk seen-yuh-reetas, I'm shore goin' to be wearin' a bullet-proof shirt."

"Well, well!" exclaimed Pinky quietly.

"The old feelosopher. How are yuh feelin', Rocky?"

"I reckon I'm feelin' pretty good," replied Rocky.

"I was a-talkin' to June Alden yesterday. She was in town with her ma."

Rocky's eyes lighted up for a moment, but it was only a flash.

"She's jist fine," continued Pinky. "Glad yuh asked, Rocky."

"Go to hell," said Rocky.

"Yeah, and if I did, I'll betcha they'd respect m'feelin's enough to lemme sleep once in a while."

"Well," remarked the sheriff, "I reckon we might as well go away and let him sleep, settin' down. The fool will go to sleep standin' up, and fall right over, without wakin' up. I've seen him do it lotsa times. C'mon."

THEY walked outside and stopped at the edge of the sidewalk. A man was coming toward them from across the street, but turned and went toward the post office. He was a tall, lean cowboy, his batwing chaps flapping like the wings of a huge bird. The sheriff glanced at Rocky's face, noted the right thumb hooked over the belt above the holstered .45, and looked back at the cowboy who had turned.

"Dan Hickey must have jist remembered not gettin' the mail," remarked the sheriff dryly. Rocky relaxed slowly, nodded and replied:

"He's a little absent-minded, I reckon."

Dan Hickey was the foreman of the Alden 73 spread, and had been partially responsible for the charges against Rocky.

"Still," observed the sheriff, "yuh couldn't gain much by gunnin' Hickey. He was workin' for Alden. Naturally he had the interests of his employer at heart."

"And," added Rocky, "he prob'ly knows who vented the brand on that old 73 cow, and ran on my Circle H."

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, yuh can't prove it, Rocky. It gives you a bad name—but it don't convince me that you'd be fool enough to do a thing like that. Henry Alden was grasp-in' at straws. Why, Rocky, in two years he's lost his whole herd. He was desperate. Ma Alden says she don't know what on earth to do. I tell yuh, they're broke. And a couple years ago the 73 was the richest outfit around here."

Rocky nodded grimly. "And Flash Rodriguez grows richer every day. He hated Henry Alden, 'cause Alden booted him off the ranch, when Flash tried to make love to June. He said he'd ruin Alden, and he's done it. And he's still got the nerve to come across the Border and show himself in Agua Frio. If I'd been Alden I'd certainly have killed him two years ago."

"Alden wasn't the killing type," said the sheriff. "He hated fights or trouble of any kind. Too easy-goin', I reckon. Well, he's dead now—and there's nothin' left for Ma Alden and June. Oh, they might get a few thousand for the ranch, but not much. A ranch without a cow is like a home without a cook-stove. Well, I reckon I better go up to the courthouse and gas with the boys. See yuh later, Rocky. I reckon yore horse and saddle are still around at my stable."

"Thank yuh, Sheriff. *Hasta luego.*"

CHAPTER THREE

Smith Brothers—Unmasked

DAN HICKEY had no ambitions toward a personal encounter with Rocky Hill. He got the ranch mail and then waited near the front of the post office, until the young cowboy rode away from town. Only then did Hickey discover that there was a letter for him among the mail. Tucking the mail under one arm, he proceeded to open and read the letter. Judging from Dan Hickey's

expression it was not pleasant news. He swore under his breath, kicked the post office door shut behind him, and crossed the street to his horse which he spurred viciously out of town.

Junk Beebee, one of the cowboys, was at the stable when Hickey reached the ranch.

"The old lady wants to see yuh, Dan," he told Hickey.

Ma Alden, a little, white-haired, sweet-faced lady, waited for Dan in the main room of the ranchhouse.

"How many head of cattle have we left, Dan?" she asked. The foreman scratched his head ruefully.

"I don't honestly know," he replied. "I wouldn't bet that there's a hundred head left—and a lot of them are canners."

"Culled by the rustlers?" queried June from an adjoining room.

"Yeah, I reckon they have been," replied Dan.

"All right," said the old lady firmly. "Have every head rounded up and drive them to Vacaville. It shouldn't take more than a couple of days to get them together."

"Aimin' to sell 'em?" queried Dan.

"Yes—at once. After that the 73 is out of business."

"I shore hate to see it," sighed Dan. "It'll mean that we're out of a job. Well, I'll start the boys early tomorrow mornin'."

Dan strode outside and June came into the room. June was not a pretty girl, but she was handsome—and capable.

"Dan has a lot of sympathy for himself, it seems," remarked June.

"I suppose that foreman jobs are hard to find, June. Dan has been a faithful man. Your father trusted him implicitly."

"That was one bad trait that my father had—trusting people. He never looked for wrong in anybody."

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"June, you can't say that Dan Hickey hasn't been honest and faithful to us."

"And still," replied June, "over a period of two years we have lost nearly a thousand head of cattle."

"Dan Hickey couldn't prevent it, June. Your father never blamed Dan."

"No one else shows a loss, Mother," June reminded her.

"It is Flash Rodriguez's revenge," declared the old lady. "Flash hated your father—and he is a bad man to have for an enemy."

"It seems to be the only answer," June sighed.

"I told your father years ago that our ranch was too close to the Border. But he even trusted the Mexicans and Indians. Dan Hickey always disagreed with him about that. Dan always contended that a fat steer was an awful temptation to a hungry Indian."

"Well," declared June, "they never ate a thousand steers in two years."

"No, I do not suppose they ate all of them, June. But Flash Rodriguez has a big ranch down below El Caballero, and he ranges a big herd down there. . . . I wonder if the sheriff has released Rocky Hill yet."

June sighed and walked over to a window. Her mother looked at her thoughtfully. Neither of them had discussed Rocky since Henry Alden had caused his arrest. June turned and looked at her mother.

"Mother," she said quietly, "did you ever wonder whether Dad was killed accidentally—or intentionally?"

"Why, June! What on earth put that idea in your mind?"

"Circumstances, Mother. Do you remember that Nick Starr came here the day before Dad was killed? They talked together a long time before the gambler went back to town. Later I heard Dad saying something to Dan Hickey about sending a telegram to some man who might help him out. They were outside the kitchen, and I heard Dan say: 'That might be a fine idea—if he's as good as Starr says he is.' I don't know who they were talking about, Mother. Dad didn't drink, and he was a good rider. And another thing, the horse he was riding never acted bad in his life."

"But, June, you know that Doctor Ames said something about a heart attack."

"Yes; I know he did. Perhaps I'm wrong, but—"

"But your father did not have a single enemy, June."

"Mother, somebody stole his cattle—was it Dad's friends?"

Ma Alden shook her head wearily. "No. I suppose not."

June walked outside into the patio.

DAN HICKEY was passing the gate, going toward the bunkhouse, and June called him. He came back, hat in hand.

"Dan, do you remember Nick Starr coming out here to see Dad just before he was killed?"

Dan squinted thoughtfully. "Yes'm, I believe he was here."

"Dan, who was the man that Dad was going to telegraph?"

Dan Hickey looked curiously at her. "Goin' to telegraph?"

"I heard you say to Dad that some man might help him out."

Dan scowled at the adobe wall for several moments, as though trying to recall the conversation. Then he said:

"Oh, yeah, I remember somethin' about it now. Starr told him about a certain detective who might help find out where all of them cows had gone. I don't remember what the man's name was. He wasn't anybody I'd ever heard about—and I don't remember where he was."

"I just wondered, Dan," said June.

Dan Hickey started away but turned

and came back. "Remember Dick Corey?" he asked.

"I should—he only left here two weeks ago, Dan," replied June.

Dan sighed and shook his head sadly. "I got a note from my cousin in Arroyo City today. He told me that somebody shot and killed Dick down there."

"Why, my goodness!" exclaimed June. "That is terrible! Why, all of us liked Dick."

"We shore did," agreed Dan. "They don't know who killed him."

Mrs. Alden was shocked over the news, and regretted the fact that Dan Hickey had fired the young cowboy who had drifted in from nowhere and worked for several months on the 73.

Hashknife and Sleepy rode their weary horses to Agua Frio, put them in a stable, and ate a big meal at a Chinese restaurant. Their long ride had been without incident. Tired out, they registered at the Agua Frio Hotel and went to bed where they slept until late in the afternoon.

"If Starr's warnin' was only half true," warned Sleepy, "we're settin' on a powder-keg, smokin' cheroots, Hashknife."

"Still," smiled Hashknife, "I don't expect to be shot right on the main street in daylight."

As was their custom they gravitated down to the sheriff's office, where they found Pinky Caldwell asleep. Their entrance caused him to stir and mutter:

"'F yo're lookin' for the sheriff—he ain't here."

"On a vacation?" queried Hashknife.

"On a horse—last time I seen him. Ho-hu-um-m!"

Pinky yawned widely, groaned and squinted at the two strangers. "Ex-cuse me," he whispered. "I was out last night."

"Just the one night?" asked Sleepy.

Pinky grinned and allowed himself the luxury of another prolonged yawn. A man came hurrying down the sidewalk and into the office.

"Hyah," grunted Pinky. "'F it ain't Ben Hur, without his chariot. Stage in early, ain't it?"

"Made a quick trip. Where's the sheriff?"

"I dunno. Mebbe he rode out to the 73. What's wrong?"

"A killin' in Vacaville last night, and

Sleepy Stevens

they want him to come up there right away."

"A killin'? Who got leaded this time, Alex?"

"Nick Starr, the gambler."

Hashknife and Sleepy looked quickly at each other. Pinky rubbed his stubbled chin and drew a deep breath. "Now who in time do yuh reckon killed Nick?" he asked.

"I dunno, Pinky. All they told me was to get the word to the sheriff as quick as I could, and tell him to look out for the Smith Brothers, who pulled out of Vacaville about midnight last night."

"Smith Brothers? I didn't know he had a brother."

"Well, I done my duty," said the stage

driver soberly. "I'll leave it to you to tell the sheriff."

THE driver looked sharply at Hashknife and Sleepy as he walked out and hurried up the street. Pinky sighed, began the manufacture of a cigarette. His brow was painfully furrowed with thought.

"When'd you fellers reach town?" he asked.

"This mornin'," replied Hashknife calmly. "Came from Arroyo City. Been workin' for the Box 48—and the names ain't Smith."

"I didn't think they was," said Pinky. "Anyway, yuh don't look like brothers—less'n it was lodge-brothers. I'm a Odd Fellow."

"I could see that," remarked Hashknife.

"Yuh seen the three links on m' coat, eh?"

"Not until just now."

"Well, hell!" snorted Pinky. "I suppose I've got to find the sheriff. That's the worst of it. If I was the sheriff and he was my deputy, I could go right ahead up to Vacaville. Have to go anyway, I suppose; so I might as well be runnin' the whole office m'self. Could, too."

"If yuh didn't go to sleep," added Sleepy.

"Yeah, that's right, too. Yuh know, there ought to be two deputies. One to do the ridin', while the other did the sleepin'. The way it is, this office is neglected. Sometimes I feel danged sorry for that desk and the two chairs—I really do."

"You didn't forget that murder in Vacaville, did yuh?" queried Sleepy. "The sheriff might like to know about it."

"Yeah, I reckon he would at that. He's queer that way. Well, gents, I'll have to lock up the office."

"Don't mind us," Hashknife grinned. "We'll get out."

Pinky left them and went to saddle his horse, while Hashknife and Sleepy lingered in front of the office, looking curiously at each other.

"Nick Starr murdered, and they're lookin' for the Smith Brothers," said Hashknife quietly. "That don't look so awful good, pardner."

"I hope to tell yuh, it don't," agreed Sleepy. "And that jail behind this office looks plenty strong. I don't mind tellin' yuh that Old Man Stevens' fav'rite offspring is growin' a swell crop of goose pimples."

"It looks like a swell chance to railroad us," said Hashknife. "They discovered that we had pulled out, and it might be that they figured Nick Starr had slipped us a warnin'; so they bogged down on him and shoved the deadwood on us. Sleepy, there's a Mexican town due south of here, El Caballero. The climate might be better than this place. What do yuh say?"

"Say? Listen. I'm halfway down there right now. That pink-headed deputy might be a lot smarter than he looks. At least, they'd be justified in arrestin' us on suspicion—and a check-up with Vacaville would just about cook our goose. C'mon."

An hour later Pinky Caldwell and Ira Bradley, the sheriff, rode into town, traveling fast. Pinky had found him out at the 73 ranch, told him the news and had also told him about the two strangers who said they came from Arroyo City.

"Of all the iggerant people, yo're the worst, Pinky," declared the sheriff. "There ain't no road from here to Arroyo City. They had to come through Vacaville."

The sheriff lost no time in making a search of Agua Frio, but the two strangers were gone. The stable keeper had some information.

"They asked me how to strike the road to Arroya City, and I said they'd have to go through Vacaville. Then they looked at each other and laughed like all git-out. I don't see what was funny about that."

"Mebbe you don't," said the sheriff.

"Which way did they go, do you know?"

"Right out the front door—like everybody else does."

"Pardner," said the sheriff, "if this county ever gits rich enough for me to hire an extra man, I'd like to hire you to match up with Pinky Caldwell."

"Me and him would do fine," agreed the stablekeeper warmly.

"Anybody should, if they didn't have enough brains to weigh 'em down none," said the sheriff.

"Was that a nice thing to tell him?" queried Pinky, as they rode toward Vacaville. "Raisin' false hopes in his breast."

"In his breast?" exploded the sheriff. "If that's where he does all his thinkin', he don't need brains."

"We can't have everything," remarked Pinky meekly. "If yuh ain't got much brains, yuh ain't got enough brains to worry about not havin' any brains. It evens itself up, I-ree."

"Makes it tough on a sheriff, Pinky." Pinky nodded dolefully.

"That's right. But don't worry, 'cause it's only yore closest friends that know about it."

CHAPTER FOUR

Wanted—For Murder

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy lost no time in getting out of Agua Frio, although they did not hurry, once they were on the road to El Caballero. It was too hot for fast traveling. It was not over three miles from Agua Frio to the Border in a direct line, but the road was crooked and followed the lines of least resistance.

As they reached a fork in the road they discovered Rocky Hill, trying to herd a wild-eyed cow and her crippled calf. Rocky was swearing low as Hashknife and Sleepy rode up.

"Tryin' to get that jug-headed cow and calf up to the ranch, where I can doctor the calf," he explained to Hashknife and Sleepy. "The coyotes will get that calf if I don't haze 'em to safety."

"How about acceptin' a little help, pardner?" queried Hashknife. "The three of us ought to handle the problem all right."

"That's shore nice of yuh. Easy job for three. But watch that cow—she's plumb proddy."

Working slowly they had little trouble in putting the two animals into Rocky's little corral.

"Pretty close to supper time," remarked Rocky, squinting at the sun. "I've got plenty beans and a nice hunk of roast beef that was cooked early today."

They tied their horses and went to the house. Rocky had a cozy little shack, fairly well kept, but he apologized.

"Yuh see, I've been in jail a couple weeks; so the place got kinda dusty," he explained. "They turned me loose early this mornin'."

Hashknife grinned slowly. "Yuh don't seem concerned about it."

"Well, I wasn't guilty, pardner."

"My name's Hartley—called Hashknife. My pardner is Sleepy Stevens."

"My name's Hill. Folks named me Rocky. Glad to meet you fellows." They shook hands, and Rocky built a fire.

"Did yuh ever know a gambler named Nick Starr?" asked Hashknife.

"I hope to tell yuh I know him," replied Rocky. "Nick's all right, even if he is a professional gambler."

"He was shot and killed in Vacaville last night."

Rocky's jaw sagged for a moment. "Nick Starr was killed? Who done it?"

"Who knows? We left there about midnight. After we left, somebody killed Nick Starr—and from what we can learn, the deadwood has been piled on us. We found that out in Agua Frio—so we was headin' for the Border,"

"Well, I'll be danged," Rocky shook his

head slowly. "Now who in the devil would kill Nick, I wonder?"

"We're strangers down here," said Hashknife. "We've never been in this part of the country, so we would not know about such things."

Rocky sat down and began rolling a cigarette. "I've been here for years, and I'm plumb willin' to talk."

"You know this Henry Alden?"

"Henry Alden," replied Rocky, "sent me to jail for ventin' a brand on one of his cows, and runnin on my own mark."

"Alden is dead now, I understand."

Rocky nodded slowly. "They say his horse dragged him to death."

"Don't yuh believe it?" queried Hashknife.

"I couldn't prove it, Hartley. Mrs. Alden refused to prosecute me, after Henry Alden was buried. But what's this all about?"

"Has somebody been stealin' Alden's cattle?"

"If all the reports are true, Hartley—they sure have. In fact, they've wrecked the 73 spread. Flash Rodriguez, a fancy Mexican, who owns the town of El Caballero, also owns a big cow outfit down there. Henry Alden threw Flash off the 73, and Flash got even with him."

"That hasn't been proved, has it, Hill?"

"You can't prove it. Americans are taboo on Flash's rancho. But what's yore interest in this deal, Hartley?"

"Well," smiled Hashknife, "as long as we've been kinda harpooned into the middle of things, we'd kinda like to know what we're up against. Have any of yore cows been rustled?"

"Not one, Hartley. In fact, Alden is the only loser as far as I know."

"Looks like revenge," remarked Sleepy.

"You can bet on that," said Rocky. "You knew Nick Starr?"

"Known him for several years," replied Hashknife. "Were you in jail when Henry Alden was killed?"

"That's right," nodded Rocky.

"Did yuh ever feel that maybe perhaps he wasn't killed quite accidentally?"

"Well, I don't know of anythin' to make me feel that way—but I do. I can't figure out a single thing that would indicate that he was murdered. Mebbe it's just a hunch, Hartley."

"Do yuh know of anybody who would profit by his death?"

"Not a single soul. They found him out there on the road, his head battered in, his clothes ragged from bein' dragged from a stirrup, and his ankle badly twisted and broke. Henry Alden didn't drink—and he was ridin' a gentle horse."

"Nick Starr was out to see him the day before he was killed," said Hashknife.

"Say!" exclaimed Rocky. "Yuh don't figure that the killin' of Nick Starr is connected with the stealin' of Alden's cattle, do yuh?"

"I don't know what to think—yet."

ROCKY finished up cooking the supper, and they ate like three starved timber wolves. After supper they discussed things again and Hashknife discovered that Rocky was in love with June Alden. In fact, through adroit questioning, Hashknife got a fairly complete history of the Agua Frio range.

He found out that Dan Hickey wanted to marry June Alden—as did Flash Rodriguez. Rocky said that Sheriff Ira Bradley had always been known as a square-shooter, and that he, Rocky, believed it.

Rocky gave them a complete description of El Caballero, and warned them to carry their guns concealed if they went across the Border.

"Only Flash's friends are allowed to pack their guns openly," he told them. "Flash has a jail down there—and he's judge and jury. . . . And don't take much money with yuh. Any of his gang would cut yore throat for a thin dime."

"All Mexicans?" queried Hashknife.

"Not much! Flash's gang are white men, and most of 'em are wanted on this side of the line."

"How do you stand with Flash?" asked Sleepy.

"Well," grinned Rocky, "after bein' in jail I ought to be in solid with him. He likes 'em tainted thataway."

"We're wanted," said Hashknife soberly. "He might grow right fond of us."

"I'm gettin' goose pimples again," declared Sleepy. "We better start travelin'."

Ira Bradley and Pinky Caldwell reached Vacaville and found Nick Starr just as dead as reported. The shot had been heard by several men, but no one of them paid any attention. Shots were common in Vacaville. It was about two o'clock in the morning when the body was discovered lying beside a fence near the livery stable. The stable keeper said that the two strangers had taken their horses sometime after midnight.

Ira Bradley scrutinized the signatures in the hotel register, and had several people describe the wanted men. A little later Big Jim Black and one of his men rode in from Arroyo City. They heard the story and the description, and went to the sheriff.

"I know both of them men, Bradley," he told the sheriff. "The tall one is named Hartley and the short one is Stevens."

"They're not the Smith Brothers, eh?"

"Not when they worked for me. 'Course, it's none of my business, Bradley," said Jim Black, "but I'd be a little careful about them two jaspers. I—I just wouldn't give 'em an even break, 'cause I've seen 'em shoot. We had a little contest at the Box 48 a few days ago, and I seen both of them fellers sock six forty-five bullets into pepper cans at seventy-five feet—and do it awful dang' fast. And a pepper can ain't very big, yuh know."

"I-ree wouldn't care if it was five-gallon kerosene cans," said Pinky. "That's better than he can do. And me and him are just about equal. So yore warnin' is hereby filed in the back of my mind."

"Everythin's in the back of yore mind," complained the sheriff. "You shore don't have anythin' in the front of yore mind. You've done lived in Agua Frio half yore life, and yuh didn't know that there wasn't any direct road from Agua Frio to Arroyo City. Don't deny it."

PINKY scratched his head thoughtfully. "Well, mebbe I am a little slow on learnin'. But in this day and age they say that some re-markable changes are bein' made. I ain't been on the east side of Agua Frio for weeks—and there might be a road over to Arroyo City."

"Wouldn't I know it, if they built a road?" the sheriff queried.

"Aw, why argue, I-ree? What I want to know is why they blame the Smith Brothers for killin' Nick Starr. Why'd they kill him? Did anybody see 'em with Nick Starr last night?"

"That's an idea, Pinky," admitted the sheriff. "I never thought of that."

But no one in Vacaville seemed to know anything about it. The fact that the two strangers rode out of town at midnight seemed to be sufficient evidence against them. The two officers were unable to find anyone who had seen them with Nick Starr.

"It looks t' me," observed Pinky, "like we're on a wild Smith chase."

"I still think they know somethin'," declared the sheriff. "If I lay my hands on 'em, I'll shore find out somethin'."

"Yeah, I believe yuh will, I-ree—and you'll prob'ly be a hell of a long time healin' up."

Hashknife and Sleepy hid their gunbelts and holsters and the package of money behind a loose board in Rocky's stable, before heading for El Caballero with their six-shooters concealed inside

the waistband of their grayed, trail-dusty overalls.

They met and talked with three officers of the Border Patrol near the Border. Because Hashknife and Sleepy were carrying their warbags on their saddles, the officers looked upon them with a certain degree of suspicion. There is usually a good reason, when American cowboys take all their wordly goods across the Border.

But since there was no word out to pick up anyone those men merely looked their suspicion.

"What sort of a hombre is Flash Rodriguez?" asked Hashknife.

"Mexican dude," replied an officer.

"Is that where he got his name?" asked Hashknife.

"Yeah, I guess so. He's plenty flashy. But don't go down there with the idea that he ain't able to run El Caballero. He might fool yuh."

Hashknife relaxed in his saddle and rolled a smoke.

"I reckon you fellers have heard about the 73 outfit bein' about cleaned out of cattle by rustlers," he said.

"Of course we heard about it," smiled one of the officers. "Uncle Sam hasn't been able to collect a penny of duty on 'em."

"Are yuh sure they've gone across the border, officer?"

"Do you know of anything else that makes tracks like a herd of cattle?" queried the officer in a sarcastic tone of voice.

"That kinda settles the question," remarked Sleepy dryly.

"Much obliged, gents," said Hashknife.

"Yuh might get somethin' definite from Rodriguez," called one of the men. "He ought to know somethin'. There's not much that he doesn't know."

"I'll ask him—and thank yuh for the advice."

CHAPTER FIVE

Maid in Ambush

IT WAS not far from the Border to El Caballero, a little, whitewash-and adobe-town of possibly twenty-five buildings, the largest of which was the El Toro Cantina, headquarters of Flash Rodriguez. The only road to El Caballero was the one which Hashknife and Sleepy came over. There were trails to the southward but no roads.

They rode boldly up to the cantina and tied their horses to a porch-post. There were Mexicans and white men idling about, and few of them gave the two strangers a second glance. It was cool in the large, low-ceilinged room of the cantina. Several Mexicans were playing a desultory game of écarte.

A fat bartender looked over them appraisingly, as they came up to the bar.

"Where can we find Flash Rodriguez?" asked Hashknife.

"Flash, hees tak' siesta now."

"Siesta, eh? How about wakin' him up?"

"Hah? Wak' heem up? Leesten, amigo; you wak' heem up now—he keel sometheeng."

Sleepy grinned widely. "I wish I had the same power. Many's the killin' I'd have on my head."

"All right," smiled Hashknife. "We'll wait until he wakes up. In the meantime we'll hunt up a place to spend the night. Yuh might tell him that the Smith Brothers were in to see him."

"The Smeeth Brodders? Sure, I tell heem. You wan' place for sleeping? H'opstairs ees the only place for sleeping een El Caballero. I'm theenk we got one bed left."

"We'll take it, pardner."

The bartender called a peon who conducted them to a little room. It was not much of a room, as rooms go, but ac-

commodations were scarce in El Caballero; so the two cowboys were satisfied. They secured the warbags from their saddles and put them in the room.

"I don't like this place, Hashknife," complained Sleepy. "Everybody tries to act like they didn't care a hoot who we are—but they're all actin'."

"*Alto!*" snapped a husky voice at the doorway, and they turned to see a tall, thin Mexican, well over six feet in height, accompanied by another Mexican, barely over five feet tall.

The tall one had eyes like a disgruntled bloodhound, a crooked nose, and mustache which hung below his collar. He wore a baggy, woolen undershirt, riding breeches that were much too large, unlaced and splayed out over the biggest pair of bare feet either of the cowboys had ever seen. On his head was an old campaign hat, several sizes too small.

The smaller one had a moonlike face, surmounted by a battered campaign hat several sizes too large, and which persisted in slipping down over his beady eyes. He wore a heavy, woolen shirt, too large in every respect, a pair of extra-tight riding breeches, and a pair of huge, unlaced boots.

Both men wore crossed ammunition belts, and each carried a rifle, which they had pointed at the two cowboys in a sort of preoccupied way.

"Rodriguez's army!" Sleepy gasped.

"Theese Heneral Rodriguez," stated the tall one, "weeshes to see me."

"Can yuh imagine a man with a wish like that?" whispered Hashknife.

"He ees saying for us to breeng you dead from alive," added the short one, releasing hold of his gun in order to cuff his hat from over his eyes.

"Where is he?" Hashknife queried.

The tall one swung his right hand, finger extended, and smacked it sharply against the casing of the doorway. The short one chuckled.

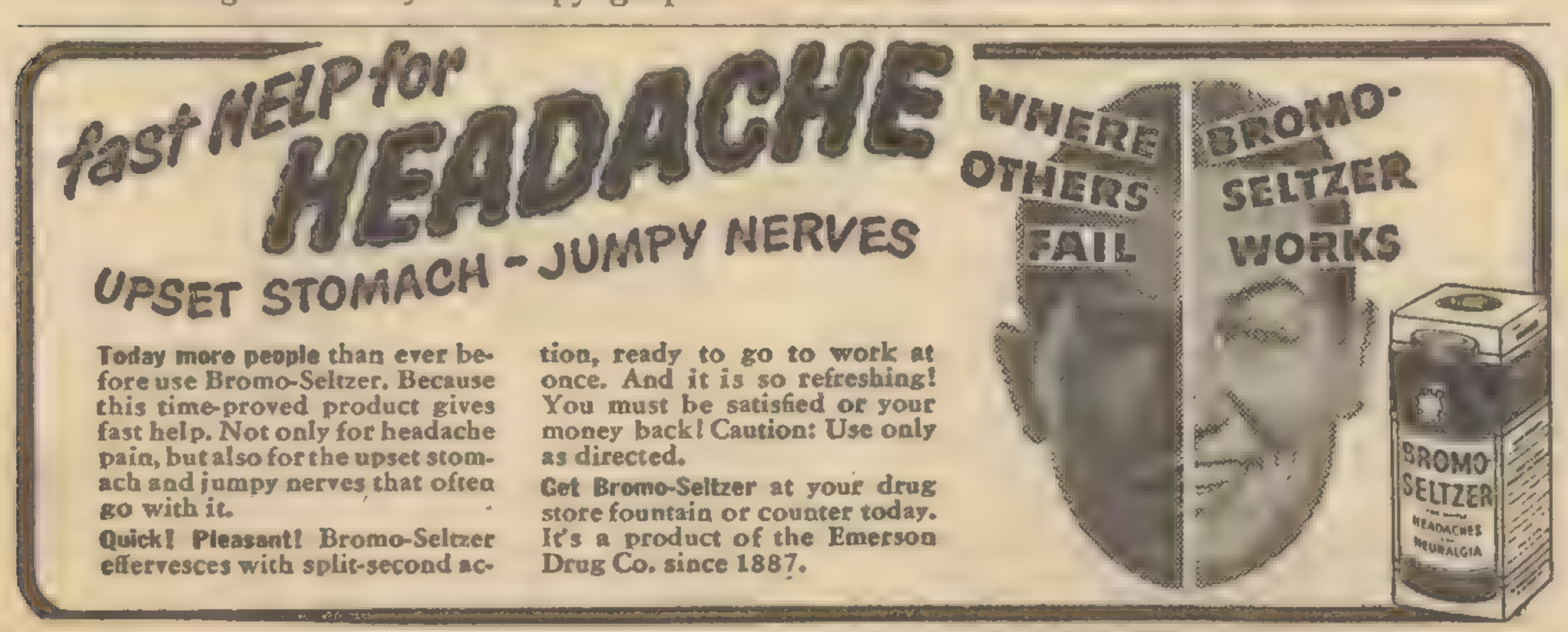
"Lead the way," choked Hashknife. "If this is his army, his navy must have drowned years ago in a wash basin."

WITH the tall one leading, and the short one bringing up the rear, they went to the end of the narrow hallway, where the tall one rapped sharply with his gun-butt.

"*Entrar,*" said a voice, and added, "Don' knock the heenges off the door."

The tall one opened the door, stepped in and moved one pace to the left to let Hashknife and Sleepy enter. The short one hurried in behind Sleepy, closed the door and took his place on the opposite side, his rifle at present-arms.

Flash Rodriguez was seated at a small table, clad in white flannels, white silk shirt, white shoes. He was above average in height, well-proportioned, handsome. His white teeth flashed in a smile beneath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a tiny, black mustache, waxed out to needle-points. A huge diamond flashed from a finger of his left hand.

Hashknife and Sleepy stopped near the table. Flash Rodriguez looked past them, lifted his brows slightly, as he said:

"Rest!"

There were two audible thumps, as gun-butts dropped, and the tall one's groaning whisper:

"*Madre de Dios!*" He had grounded the heavy rifle on his bare toes.

"How you like my army, eh?" queried Flash Rodriguez.

"Pretty good," replied Hashknife. "But I'm wonderin' how they can shoot them forty-five-seventy cartridges in Mauser rifles."

Flash Rodriguez chuckled, as he fingered his mustache.

"There ees no war," he told them soberly, "so w'at ees the deeference? Them cartridge shine like anyt'ing, eh? And eef they can't load the gon—I am not get shot accidental."

"I'd hate to trust 'em, even if the shells didn't fit," said Hashknife. "What's the names of yore army?"

"Names? Oh, sure. The tall one ees Beeg Casino, and the leetle one ees Leetle Casino. They get each other's hat accidental, and they 'aven't sense enough to trade back. You came to El Caballero to see me?"

"We thought we might want to stay here a while. We're the Smith Brothers."

"*Bueno!*" Flash Rodriguez pursed his lips, his brows lifting. "I'm suppose you come for the *reunion de la familia,* eh?"

"Family reunion?" queried Hashknife.

"Sure. I theenk I 'ave seven, eight Smeeth already. Every man who came 'ere in las' two years ees name Smeeth."

"It's a very common name in United States," smiled Hashknife.

"She's get damn common een Mejico, too. W'at you want, Smeeth Brodder?"

"We want a chance to keep away from the sheriff of Agua Frio," said Hashknife.

"Oh!" Flash's brows lifted slightly. "W'y he wan' you?"

"He thinks we killed a man in Vacaville."

"So? W'at ees name of theese dead man?"

"Nick Starr."

"*Dios mio!* Neek Starr, eh?"

"You knew him?" asked Sleepy.

"Why not?" countered Flash coldly. "He was my amigo."

"Mine, too," stated Hashknife soberly. "He was a square gambler."

Flash Rodriguez's eyes narrowed, as he looked from Hashknife to Sleepy.

"You say he was your amigo?" he asked curiously. "Then w'y they say you keel heem?"

"Sometimes, my friend," replied Hashknife, "it is awful simple to accuse a stranger. Nick Starr was the only man in Vacaville who knew us. He wrote us a warning note—tellin' us to not go to Agua Frio. So—" Hashknife smiled thinly—"we rode away from Vacaville at midnight, headin' for Agua Frio. An hour or so later they found him—dead. We heard about it in Agua Frio."

Flash Rodriguez fingered his mustache, his eyes half-closed. Finally he said:

"Neek Starr warn you and you not obey, eh? W'at ees dangerous for you een Agua Frio?"

"That's what we went there to find out. When we heard that we were accused of murder, we came here for safety. As I told yuh, Nick Starr was our friend—and we don't kill our friends."

Flash Rodriguez nodded slowly. "That ees good. W'at you do, biffore you come to Vacaville?"

"We worked for the Box 48 outfit at Arroyo City."

Flash nodded thoughtfully.

"*Bueno.* W'ile you are 'ere, do not forget that Flash Rodriguez ees the boss of El Caballero. So long as you do not

interfere weeth my business nor my personal pleasure—all ees good. To my frands, I am a gentleman—but to my enemy I am w'at you call a roof-neck. I theenk you onnerstand?"

"We shore do," agreed Hashknife. "Thank yuh very kindly."

Flash Rodriguez leaned aside, looking at his bodyguard, who had nearly gone to sleep.

"*Attencion!*" he yelled loudly.

Both men jerked upright. Little Casino's hat fell over his eyes, while Big Casino's fell off his head. The guns came up to a rigid present-arms.

"Good, eh?" chuckled Flash Rodriguez.

"Perfect," agreed Sleepy soberly.

"*Soldados,* you weel escort the gentlemen down to the cantina," ordered Flash Rodriguez. "Eet ees jus' possible that they weel buy you wan small bottle tequila—I hope—because I am tire from buying dreenk for you all the time. *Buenas tardes, caballeros.*"

THEY purchased a bottle of tequila for the army, which was voluble in its thanks, and went away to find a cool place in which to drink the fiery liquor. There were several more men around the cantina. Hashknife touched Sleepy on the arm and indicated a cowboy at the écarte table; a tall, rawboned, hard-faced man, badly in need of barbering.

"Dutch Wentz," whispered Hashknife. "The gent from Thunder Valley."

"I thought he was in the Wyomin' penitentiary," said Sleepy.

"A year," said Hashknife quietly. "Time shore passes, pardner."

Dutch Wentz left the table and came over near the bar, where he stopped to talk with another cowboy. He saw Hashknife and Sleepy and a flash of recognition showed in his eyes. But he turned back to his companion and they walked toward the front of the cantina.

Hashknife turned to the bartender.

"Who is that puncher with Dutch Wentz?" he asked.

The Mexican glanced toward the two men at the front of the house.

"That ees Carlos Nestor," he replied.

"A couple of Flash Rodriguez's men?"

The bartender shrugged his shoulders.

"*Quien sabe?*" he replied indifferently.

Late that evening Pinky Caldwell, the deputy sheriff, came to El Caballero, along with a cattleman named Ed Benson, who with his brother Lynn, owned a small ranch near the Border. Pinky grinned at Hashknife and Sleepy, and introduced them to Ed Benson. Pinky told them about riding to Vacaville with the sheriff. He also told them that Big Jim Black had indentified them.

"Names don't mean anythin'," laughed Benson. "I'll buy a drink."

Quite a number of the cowboys came across the Border to dance with the girls at the El Toro, and to play the few games of chance. There was a small orchestra and the dancing was rather rough. It was late, when Hashknife and Sleepy went up to their room, only to find their bed torn apart, the contents of their war-sacks scattered. Someone had made a swift search of the room during the evening.

"The Smith Brothers have been investigated," said Sleepy dryly, as they surveyed the room. "I hope they found what they was lookin' for."

"They didn't pardner," smiled Hashknife, "'cause it's cached in Rocky Hill's stable."

"You think they were lookin' for that money?"

"Yeah, that must be what they looked for."

"But, Hashknife, I don't quite figure—"

"I don't either. But the two men who got the dummy package must have figured that we outsmarted them—"

"Well," Sleepy sent his hat spinning to the top of the scattered bedding, "I can't see where Mexico is goin' to be any haven

of safety for me and you. I wish the owner of it had that money."

"I reckon he feels the same way about it, Sleepy. Well, we might as well make the bed and roll up a little shut-eye."

June Alden, reading by lamplight in her room, closed her book, laid it aside and sat there, looking toward the doorway of an adjoining room. For fully a minute she listened to the regular breathing of her mother. Then she got up, crossed the room and gently closed the door.

From her closet she took a faded silk shirt, overalls, boots and an old Stetson sombrero, which she quickly donned, except the boots, which she carried in her hand. Extinguishing the lamp she groped her way to the hall door and went softly down the stairs to the big main room. Without making any light she took a rifle from beside the fireplace, closed the front door carefully and sat down on the bottom step of the porch steps before putting on her boots.

A horse nickered softly from its stall, as she opened the stable door and lighted a lantern. As efficiently as one of the cowboys, she saddled the animal, using a hackamore instead of a bridle, and led the horse outside, where she climbed into the saddle. She placed the rifle crosswise in front of her, and rode slowly away from the house.

Dan Hickey and the cowboys were all in town. They had rounded up the last of the 73 cattle and threw them into a fenced hundred-and-sixty a short distance from the ranchhouse, where a buyer was to look them over next day. There were only ninety-six head—the last of a fine herd—and when those were sold the 73 outfit would pass into history.

June had a feeling that the cattle were not safe tonight. Just what she could do to protect the herd, she did not know. But at least she was going out there to see what could be done. June could shoot. That thirty-thirty carbine had been a present from her father, and Rocky Hill had taught her to notch her sights and squeeze the trigger. She had not seen Rocky since his arrest. She knew what people were saying—that she still cared for Rocky, and had asked her mother to not prosecute the case. Dan Hickey had taken care to let her know about that.

JUNE could not believe that Rocky was guilty. He was far too shrewd to steal a cow in that blundering manner. If he had done such a thing, it would be clever enough to escape instant detection. Someone had done it deliberately, to implicate Rocky. Even her father had admitted that it was hardly the work of a smart cowman.

June opened the big gate to the fenced pasture and led her horse through. Only a small portion of the hundred-and-sixty was open, level land. The rest of it was hilly, brushy and dotted with scrub-oak. June rode for one of the high spots, where she drew rein in the shadow of an oak tree.

Apparently the cattle were bedded down, because she could not see any movement. Coyotes chattered far back in the hills, and somewhere a cow bawled softly. June had seen the remnant of the herd when the cowboys had sent them through the big gate. They would not bring a big price; but there should be enough to insure June and her mother to live on for a while.

For perhaps an hour June sat motionless under the tree. She began to feel a little foolish and she had just made up her mind to go back, when a distant sound caused her to straighten in her saddle. What she heard, was the faraway, raspy squeak of the big gate. Someone was coming into the pasture.

June turned her horse around, facing the gate. Two riders were coming up through the brush. They passed behind her, and then she could see their shadows,

as they topped a narrow ridge, going toward the rear of the pasture.

June's hands tightened on her rifle. There could be no honest reason for riders entering that pasture at night. She was afraid to follow them, lest they should hear her. After a while she could hear cattle moving, but they were far away, crashing through the dry brush.

A little later several head came out of the brush and began coming up the slope toward her. Evidently a rider was sending them out of the brush, but working them slowly. June heard the soft thud of hoofs, and turned to see a rider swinging in from toward the big gate. He whirled in below the few head of drifting cattle, as though to throw them back toward the center of the field.

June found the rustler, sprawled on his back.

June lifted her rifle, trying to locate the sights in the weak light. She saw the moonlight flash on the gun in the man's hand, as he spurred ahead, and her finger tightened on the trigger.

A pencil of flame licked from the muzzle of the thirty-thirty, and the whip-like report echoed back from the hills. The horse was going head-over-heels, when June lowered the gun. Her horse nearly unseated her, but she jerked him up and levered in another shell. The horse and rider blended into the shadows.

Panting, June dismounted and dropped her reins. Gripping the gun tightly she

stumbled down the slope. The rustler's horse was dead, lying nearly upside down in a tangle of brush. June found the rider sprawled on his back several feet away. His hat was off; his face turned full in the moonlight.

It was Rocky Hill.

CHAPTER SIX

Orders from the General

HE WAS not dead, but knocked unconscious. June turned away and stumbled back up the hill to her horse. Somehow she did not care about the cattle now. There was no doubt in her mind that Rocky was one of the rustlers; one of the men who had ruined the 73.

Sick at heart she rode back to the ranch where she stabled her horse and made her way back to her room. But she could not sleep. She heard the cowboys come back from Agua Frio about four o'clock in the morning, and after that she slept for a while, only to be awakened by her mother.

"June! June! Dan Hickey just came in and said that rustlers have cut the back pasture fence. They've stolen all that was left."

And Dan Hickey was calling from the bottom of the stairs:

"And we found a dead horse in the pasture. His saddle and bridle are gone—but the horse belongs to Rocky Hill."

"Did you hear that, June?" asked her mother.

"Yes, Mother. But it doesn't mean that Rocky was riding the horse."

"I'm goin' in to get the sheriff," stated Dan Hickey. "We'll cut in toward the Border, and mebbe we can pick up the trail. Gosh, we should have posted a guard out there last night, Mrs. Alden."

"Don't blame yourself too much, Dan."

"He won't," said June calmly. Her eyes flashed him a queer look, "Don't worry."

Dan Hickey and the boys reported to the sheriff, and they all rode for hours, trying to pick up the trail of the missing cows, but to no avail. Back in the sheriff's office, Pinky Caldwell stretched his legs, sighed wearily and squinted at Ira Bradley, the sheriff.

"What'd yuh say, I-ree?" he asked.

"I just asked yuh if yuh seen the Smith Brothers in El Caballero."

"Uh-huh—I seen 'em. Big Jim Black was right—they ain't Smiths."

"I didn't think they was."

"Somethin' else yuh don't know, I-ree. Remember Dutch Wentz?"

"That polecat!"

"All right—I ain't condonin' him, I-ree. He's down there, too. Been there a long time. I was a-talkin' to Dutch and Carl Nestor. Nestor is a horse-thief from Wyomin', too, I think. Anyway, Dutch knows this Hartley—plenty. He says Hartley is concentrated poison."

"Wanted—huh?" grunted the sheriff.

"Na-a-aw! Dutch says he's the best range-detective yuh ever saw. Dutch says he's even scared of him in Mexico. And you know, the law can't touch Dutch down there, I-ree. He says that this Hashknife can take a flea and build it up to a buzzard. He says that either one of them Smith Brothers can shoot the buttons off —"

"Wait a minute, Pinky," interrupted the sheriff. "I don't doubt that Dutch Wentz told yuh somethin' about 'em—but yo're buildin' yore own loop as yuh go along. Tame yourself down a little."

"Well," said Pinky quietly, "Dutch said they was smart."

"Yeah, I guess that's right. Hashknife Hartley, eh?"

"And Sleepy Stevens. Dutch says they're concentrated—"

"Poison—I know. And they're wanted for killin' Nick Starr."

"I don't think they ever killed him, I-ree."

"That's the trouble with you, Pinky. As long as yo're an officer of the law, yuh ort to believe everybody guilty."

"Includin' me and you, I-ree?"

"Well, yuh can leave me out. How about you ridin' down to Rocky Hill's place and askin' him how come his horse gits killed on the 73 last night?"

"Oh, I don't know," Pinky yawned. "Somebody'll prob'ly tell him. I-ree—and I'm goin' down to El Caballero t'night. Got a date with a señorita."

"All right," said the sheriff, "if yo're goin' to El Caballero tonight, why not stop and tell Rocky about his horse? It's not far out of yore way."

"Oh, all right," sighed Pinky. "But I shore hate to mix business with pleasure. Yuh don't happen to want to send any message to Hashknife Hartley, do yuh?"

"Yuh might tell him to let the fleas alone—and we've got all the damn buzzards we need."

IT WAS just dark when Pinky rode in at Rocky's ranch. There was a light in the kitchen, where Rocky was cooking supper. Being a cautious soul Pinky called to him before riding in close. Rocky had his head crudely bandaged, and a bandage around his right wrist.

"Hyah, Pinky," he said. "What's new?"

"What yuh been doin' to yourself, Rocky?"

"Fixin' the roof on my stable, and fell off," lied Rocky glibly.

"Yea-a-ah? Turnin' carpenter, eh?"

"Oh, I fix things, Pinky."

"Uh-huh. Yuh still ride a gray gelding with a white head?"

"Once in a while," replied Rocky.

"Don't know who was a-ridin' it last night, do yuh?"

Rocky turned quickly. "Ridin' my gray horse?"

"Uh-huh. It's over near the 73—in their fenced hundred-and-sixty. Neck busted by a bullet, and saddle sweat-marks on its hide."

"Well, I'll be darned!" exclaimed Rocky. "That's funny."

"Uh-huh. Ma Alden had the boys round up every head of the 73 cattle and throw 'em in that pasture. Last night the south fence was cut—and every head rustled."

"Is that a fact, Pinky? Gee, I'm sure sorry. Why—why, the rustlers must have been ridin' my horse!"

"Yea-a-ah," nodded Pinky soberly. "Prob'ly didn't like its looks; so they broke its neck."

"Sort of a mystery, isn't it?"

"That's what I thought. If they used yore horse to rustle cattle, why would they kill it and leave it there? Don't make sense."

Rocky scratched his head thoughtfully. "No, it don't, Pinky."

"Head very sore?"

"Yeah, it is—kinda. Knocked me out—cold."

"Didn't know anythin' for quite a while, eh?"

"Oh, I reckon I was knocked out for ten, fifteen minutes."

"Uh-huh," drawled Pinky. He reached around the waistband of his pants, under his coat, and drew out a Colt .45 which he placed on the kitchen table.

"Yuh must have been knocked pretty cold, Rocky, to go away and leave yore gun on the ground. I found it in a mesquite about ten feet from the dead horse. I don't guess it's hurt any."

For several moments the two men looked at each other. Rocky's face was grim, his eyes hard, as he said quietly: "Thank yuh, Pinky."

"Yo're welcome, Rocky. Nice evenin'."

Pinky turned and stepped outside. Straight in front of him was the shadowy outline of Rocky's stable, its sagging top etched sharply against the sky.

"I never knowed a puncher yet that

was worth shucks as a carpenter," he said. "Better keep off roofs, Rocky; yuh might really hurt yourself."

Then he got on his horse and headed for El Caballero to keep a date with a señorita.

Rocky stood in the doorway and watched the deputy ride away. When the rider had disappeared he turned and picked up his gun, balancing it in his hand, his lips set in a grim line.

"I hope that some day I'll find out who downed my horse," he muttered. "What I'll do to him won't have to be done twice."

Pinky found Hashknife and Sleepy in the El Toro Cantina, and told them about the stolen cattle. "That cleans out the 73 outfit," he told them. "Every cow gone. I reckon Flash Rodriguez made good his threat."

"And Nick Starr was a friend of Henry Alden's." Hashknife remarked.

"That's right—he was."

"And Flash Rodriguez swears that Nick Starr was his friend."

"He was, eh? That complicates things. You fellers were workin' for Big Jim Black, at Arroyo City, wasn't yuh—before yuh came here?"

"That's right."

"Didja know a cowboy named Dick Corey down there?"

"No, I never heard the name."

"Uh-huh. Well, he worked for the 73 for quite a while, but lost his job and drifted away. Somebody shot him at Arroyo City, and it must have been just after you left there. We got the report from Ed Wells, the sheriff at Arroyo City."

"We were there when he was killed," said Hashknife. "Nobody seemed to know who he was. In fact, Ed Wells and I were first ones to reach him after he fell. He was shot in the dark beside a hitch-rack."

"Uh-huh," muttered Pinky thoughtfully. "We heard that. Yuh say that nobody knew who he was?"

"Hadn't been identified when we left there."

"Hadn't, eh? Well, well!" Pinky caressed his chin, which was badly razor-nicked. "Uh-huh—uh-huh. Well, I've got me a date, gents. See yuh later." Pinky started away, but came back to them.

"Another funny thing," he said quietly. "After them cattle was stole from the Alden ranch, they found a dead horse with the saddle sweat-marks still on its side. A bullet broke its neck. . . . The dead horse belonged to Rocky Hill."

"That's interestin'," remarked Hashknife. "Didja see Rocky about it?"

"I told him about the horse. Rocky's kinda bunged up. He was fixin' the roof on his stable—and fell off on his head. Well, I'll see yuh later."

Big Casino touched Hashknife on the arm and he turned to see Rodriguez's army—Big and Little Casino— in full battle array.

"The Heneral weeshes to see me," stated Big Casino.

"Is he upstairs in his room?" asked Hashknife.

"Si, señor."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy preceded the army up to Rodriguez's room, where their general yawned, lighted a cigarette and looked them over. "Meester 'Artley," said Rodríguez wearily, "I am ver' sorry, but I mus' ask you to leave El Caballero."

"You know my name, eh?" smiled the tall cowboy.

"I know everytheeng. I know you are beeg detective. That ees not good in El Caballero."

"Who told yuh I am a detective?" queried Hashknife.

"Maybe the leetle bird tell me."

"A buzzard named Dutch Wentz?"

"W'at ees the deeference. This ees Mejico. There ees notheeng for you to do here."

"We came here for protection. If you know everything, you know that we came here to escape arrest for murder."

Rodriguez nodded slowly. "That ees true. But—" he looked up at them, a smile on his face—"you make me damn nervous."

"You don't need to be nervous," smiled Hashknife. "Of course, yuh know that the last of Alden's cattle were stolen and brought down here—last night, I suppose."

Rodriguez shook his head. "I know notheeng about hees cattle."

"They told me that you swore to break Alden."

"*Dio mio*, of course! I am so mad I make threat. But—" he shrugged his shoulders— "I am foolish mad, that ees all."

"They are broke, Rodriguez. Every bit of stock has been stolen from them."

"That ees w'at you call—ver' toff. I tell everybodee that I'm mak' Alden pay beeg for w'at he do to me. Alden paid—beeg." Rodriguez leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. "But he never paid to me."

Hashknife smiled his disbelief. "They were traced to the Border—and you control this country down here."

Rodriguez leaned back, puffing slowly on his cigarette. Then he leaned forward again, pointing a finger at the tall cowboy.

"Leesten," he said, "below this town ees my rancho. I control all this land. I raise plenty cattle. You theenk I do not know w'at go on down here. I tell you, señor, those Alden cow never come to me."

"If yo're playin' a square game, why chase me out, Rodriguez? Want me to tell yuh why? Yo're losin' yore grip down here. This may be Mejico—but some *Americanos* are givin' you orders. They've ordered you to send us back—and you don't dare refuse 'em."

Flash Rodriguez tensed for a moment, but shrugged his shoulders.

"I sugges' you go tonight," he said flatly.

"All right, Rodriguez. I think yo're on the square, but you've got a bunch of bad boys down here. I wouldn't be surprised if they were plannin' to take El Caballero away from yuh—if yuh don't follow their orders. They'd cut yore throat for a thin dime. Adios."

Hashknife and Sleepy walked out, but Big Casino did not follow. He shut the door behind them.

"What do yuh think?" queries Sleepy, as they halted at the top of the stairs.

"It looks like we're stuck," grinned Hashknife. "Rodriguez wants us out of here, because pressure is bein' brought to bear on him. It shore seems that Rodriguez never got the Alden cows—but who did—and how? Somebody figures we've still got that package of money. They couldn't find it in our room, and if we're forced to move, we might have it with us."

"What's our best move?" queried Sleepy.

"We'll wait until dark and see what happens."

Rocky Hill came to Agua Frio shortly after noon that day. He had decided to tell the sheriff what had happened at the 73 ranch. There was no question in his mind that Pinky Caldwell believed that Rocky had been one of the rustlers. Rocky did not remember losing his gun. In fact he had been so stunned from the fall that he was halfway back to his ranch, carrying his saddle and bridle, before he realized things clearly.

He tied his horse at the hitch-rack and sauntered across the street to the front of a general store, where he leaned against a porch post, staring moodily at the ground.

When June Alden and Dan Hickey drove up and stopped nearby, he did not even see them.

June walked by him into the store without even glancing in Rocky's direction. He jerked slightly, turned his head and watched her enter the store. Dan Hickey laughed shortly, turned on his heel and walked toward the saloon. Only now did Rocky realize that June had snubbed him and that it had drawn a laugh from Dan Hickey.

For a moment Rocky's eyes blazed and he shoved angrily away from the post, meaning to follow Dan Hickey.

Then caution turned the anger out of him and he decided to have his talk with the sheriff right away. At the door of the sheriff's office, the sound of voices made him stop outside the open doorway. Ed Benson was saying:

"I happen to know that Hartley and Stevens are comin' out of El Caballero tonight. Word has been passed that Flash Rodriguez ordered 'em out; so if yo're there at the Border tonight—"

"They're still charged with the murder of Nick Starr," replied the sheriff. "Thank yuh a lot, Ed—we'll be there."

Rocky turned and walked back to the store, where he mounted his horse and rode away. The Alden team was still there in front of the store. As Rocky rode away he saw Ed Benson coming from the sheriff's office, going to the saloon.

"I reckon I'll be goin' to Mexico," mused Rocky. "I don't like to throw a monkey-wrench into the machinery of the law—but I don't believe Hartley and Stevens killed Nick Starr."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pinky Noses Around

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy, their war-sacks packed and tied, sat in their little room in the El Toro Cantina, listening to the sounds from down in the barroom and gambling parlor. Sleepy's eyes were serious, as he eyed the closed door.

"I wonder if Rodriguez is double-crossin' us, pardner," he said quietly.

"I don't believe it," replied Hashknife. He whispered, "Keep in your room until I send you the word."

"It's after nine o'clock—and the only way out is down them old stairs."

Hashknife lifted his head and motioned Sleepy to silence. Somebody was coming quietly along the hallway. After a few moments there was a slight tap on the door. With a gun gripped in his right hand Hashknife eased the door open. It was Big Casino, with a silly grin on his long face.

From inside his bulging shirt he began hauling out a long piece of half-inch rope.

"That looks long enough to hang both of us," said Sleepy.

"For the weendow," explained Big Casino, "Your 'orses by the ol' adobe at the end from the street."

"I see," nodded Hashknife. "Rodriguez wants us to go out the window, eh? But why not go down the stairs?"

Big Casino shrugged his shoulders. "At the top from the stairs ees a man weeth a shotgun."

"Oh!" exclaimed Hashknife quietly. "Who is the man?"

"*Quien sabe?* Be-low ees more, I'm theenk."

"Kinda ganged up on us, eh? Let's try that rope."

They shoved the bed over to the window, tied one end of the rope to a leg, and tossed the coil outside. It more than reached the ground. Then Hashknife turned and looked keenly at Big Casino. That funny, ill-fitting hat, the crossed cartridge belts.

"Let me borrow that hat and the belts, Big Casino," he said.

"No *entendar,*" said the tall Mexican.

Hashknife reached up, took the hat and

placed it on his own head. Big Casino grinned widely. He made no protest, when Hashknife took off the two belts and placed them on himself. Of course, Big Casino had no idea of why Hashknife did this. Motioning Sleepy to see that Big Casino stayed in the room, Hashknife picked up Big Casino's rifle and went shuffling outside into the badly lighted hallway.

Around the corner he went, heading for the stairs. There was a man in the shadow near the top of the stairway. He relaxed as Hashknife came closer, recognizing him as Big Casino. He turned, leaning forward and aside, glancing down into the cantina, as though looking for someone, when the rifle barrel came into solid contact with his head.

The shotgun thudded to the floor, and the man was collapsing, when Hashknife caught him around the body. There was so much noise in the cantina that no one heard the thud of the shotgun. Hashknife lifted the unconscious man, swung him above his head and flung him bodily down the stairs.

As the man went head-over-heels Hashknife swept up the double-barreled shotgun, cocked it quickly and lifted the butt to his shoulder. There was a huge oil lamp swinging over the top of the bar, and another from the ceiling in the center of the room.

Twice that buckshot-loaded weapon thundered, smashing both of the lamps, throwing the place into darkness. Then Hashknife whirled and ran back to the room, flung off the hat and belts, and tossed their war-sacks through the window. And while Big Casino looked dumbly around, they slid down the rope, picked up their war-sacks and darted away in the shadows.

For several moments Big Casino was undecided. Then he looped the belts over his shoulders, put on his hat, climbed clumsily over the sill and slid to the ground. Quickly he lumbered into the shadows and away from the cantina.

ROCKY HILL had been in the cantina for an hour or more, waiting for a chance to see Hashknife and Sleepy. He had inquired about them, but no one seemed to know where they were. He was standing near the doorway, when a shout went up and he turned to see the man's feet waving in the air, just before he finally landed in the middle of the room.

Before Rocky could start toward the stunned crowd the two blasts of the shotgun put out all the lights except a small lamp over the roulette layout. There was a general rush for the door, and Rocky was one of the first to get outside. He heard a tense voice say, "As sure as death and taxes it was Hartley!"

Rocky tried to see who had spoken, but there were too many men and the light

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was poor. He headed for his horse, which he had left up the street near an old adobe. Swinging into his saddle, Rocky drew up in the shadow of the old adobe.

A lone horseman came galloping up the street, and in the dim light Rocky thought he recognized Horace Benson. The man swept on past, and Rocky rode in quite a ways behind him. Rocky wanted to find Hashknife and Sleepy and tell them that the law was waiting for them just across the Border.

But there was no sign of Hashknife and Sleepy; so Rocky rode on toward the Border, nearly running into two riders, who stopped in the middle of the road. But he managed to avoid being seen, as they went galloping on toward the Border.

Rocky was close to the Border now. He had decided to wait on the Mexican side to try and intercept Hashknife and Sleepy, but before he reached the Border he heard a fusillade of shots beyond. There was no doubt in his mind that the officers had intercepted the two wanted men; so he galloped on to a spot less than a quarter of a mile beyond the border, where he found Sheriff Bradley, Pinky Caldwell, and Ed Benson. Benson was raving as Rocky drew up beside the three men. In the middle of the road was a huddled figure—Horace Benson.

"We yelled for yuh to stop, Ed," protested Pinky. "We was here to stop Hartley and Stevens. In this light—"

"You knew we'd be here," interrupted the sheriff. "I told yuh we'd be here. I'm sorry about Horace—but— oh, hello, Rocky."

"Hyah, Sheriff," replied Rocky. "What happened?"

"They shot Horace!" blared Ed Benson. "Shot him down like—"

"A dog," finished Pinky. "You've told us that same thing seven times."

"Kill him?" queried Rocky.

The sheriff drew a deep breath and replied quietly:

"Yeah."

"Somebody'll pay for this," raved Ed Benson.

"Rocky, what happened over in El Caballero?" asked Pinky.

"I don't know, Pinky. I saw somebody throw Dutch Wentz off the top of the stairs at the El Toro, and about the time he hit the middle of the cantina, somebody at the top of the stairs blasted out the lights with a shotgun."

"Who was it?" queried the sheriff.

"I heard somebody sayin' that it was Hartley."

"I'm just wonderin' why Hartley should throw Dutch Wentz down the stairs," remarked the sheriff.

"To hell with that!" snapped Ed Benson. "We've got to get Horace to a doctor. He might not be dead."

"He's dead all right," said the sheriff quietly.

"Well, what's it all about?" asked Rocky. "Was you officers waitin' here to capture Hartley and Stevens?"

"We was," replied Pinky. "And a hell of a job we made of it. Ed tells us that Hartley and Stevens was to be run out of El Caballero tonight; so we waits for them. But Ed and Horace came ahead, failed to stop, when we yelled—and—and there's Horace."

Another rider came galloping up and drew rein. It was Dan Hickey, foreman of the Alden outfit. Ed Benson explained what happened to Horace. Dan was properly shocked, after which he told them what he had seen in the El Toro. Dan had been at the bar, when Dutch Wentz sailed out from the top of the stairs, and made a forced landing in the middle of the crowded room.

"He was kinda bunged up," said Dan, "but he recovered enough to tell us that Big Casino, that big, bug-headed Mexican bodyguard of Flash Rodriguez, was the one that banged him over the head. Dutch didn't remember anythin' about bein'

dumped all the way down the stairs."

"That's funny," grunted Ed Benson. "But Dutch ort to know. I wonder why Big Casino would hit Dutch."

"Where was you, Ed?" asked Rocky. "I didn't see you in the El Toro."

"Me? Why, I—well, I was outside. That's why I didn't see it. Horace was inside the cantina."

"Uh-huh. He came out, and the both of yuh came here."

"That's right. But—" Ed hesitated for a moment. "What's it to yuh, anyway, Hill? Is it any of yore business what I do?"

"Wait a minute!" snapped Pinky. "This ain't no time nor place for arguments. We better take Horace to a doctor. There may be some life in him, but I doubt it. Get his horse, Ed."

"Well, I reckon I'll be goin' home," said Rocky, and rode on, without any comments from the officers.

He was about two hundred yards beyond the scene of the accident, when a voice called from the shadow:

"Hello, Rocky."

ROCKY jerked up and turned in his saddle. Hashknife and Sleepy were riding in beside him, coming out of the mesquite shadows.

"Where on earth did you boys come from?" asked Rocky.

Hashknife chuckled. "Recently we came from down near where you and the others talked things over. Yuh see, Rocky, when there's trouble brewin' we never use the road. It was easy to halt on the south side of the Border and wait until the shootin' was over."

"We better be movin' along," suggested Sleepy.

They galloped along to where they left the main road, and slowed down to foldow the crooked road to Rocky's place.

"I went to El Caballero to warn you boys," offered Rocky. "I knew that the officers would try to take you, when you came across."

"Thank yuh, Rocky," said Hashknife. "As a matter of fact, Ed Benson was set to get us before we got to the Border. His brother came along, after the ruckus at the El Toro, and they rode together. Dutch Wentz was planted in that upper hall at the El Toro, armed with a riot-gun, waitin' for us to come downstairs."

"Dutch said that Big Casino got him," said Rocky.

"That's goin' to make it tough for Big Casino. I wore his belts and his hat. The light was pretty bad up there. Flash Rodriguez had Big Casino plant our horses behind the old adobe. Your horse was out in front."

"I'll be darned!" grunted Rocky. "Flash Rodriguez helped yuh?"

"It kinda looks like he did, Rocky. If he hadn't they could have nailed our hides to the mast, when we slid down the rope from our window. Yes sir, I'm inclined to give that Mexican a lot of credit."

"It's about the first credit he's ever had around here."

"Yeah, I reckon it is. I wonder if they'll look for us here at your place."

"Mebbe," said Rocky. "But yuh can keep under cover for a while—and if it comes to trouble—well, I don't mind a little more."

Both Dan Hickey and Junk Beebe came back from town the next morning, bringing the mail, which Dan handed to June. They went to the bunkhouse, but Dan came back a few moments later, searching the patio floor with his eyes. He went through the big gate and scanned the ground as he went slowly back to the stable.

June watched him curiously, wondering what he had lost. He seemed perturbed as he returned and went to the bunkhouse, and a little later he and Junks saddled their horses and rode slowly back toward Agua Frio.

June went into the patio, crossed to the opposite side from the path to the bunkhouse and picked up a folded piece of paper, which might have blown over there. It was a single sheet, folded to fit an envelope, and on it was written in ink:

Information from C. A. proves Hartley and Stevens dangerous. Get them as quick as you can. Believe they got that money from D. C. and probably have it with them. Act quick.

B. J.

JUNE read it several times, wondering what it meant. She did not know what any of the initials meant, except the C. A., which might stand for Cattleman's Association. She had often heard it referred to by those initials. As she folded up the paper she heard a chuckle, and turned to see Pinky Caldwell, standing just inside the gate.

"Pinky, you frightened me!" she exclaimed smiling at him.

"Yeah?" chuckled Pinky. "Well, my face affects lotsa folks thataway. Where's all the boys t'day, June?"

"Dan and Junk just rode toward town."

"Uh-huh. Well, I kinda cut across the hills—jist lookin' around. Nice weather we're havin' these days."

"Pinky, you didn't come out here to talk about the weather."

"No'm, I don't reckon I did. T' tell yuh the truth, I jist rode up from Rocky's ranch."

"Oh!"

"That's jist exactly what I said, June. Yuh see, I walked into the house and looked square into the muzzles of a couple forty-fives. Couple of competent-lookin' gents behind them guns. They said: 'Set down, Pinky, and rest yore feet,' and I set. We had quite a talk. Yessir"—Pinky grinned thoughtfully—"we shore did. Funny part of it was—I was alookin' for the same two gents—and they took me jist like Grant took Richmond. Rocky was amused. Yessir, I'd say he was a heap amused. I sure do like that Rocky Hill."

"I'm not interested in Rocky Hill," said June soberly.

"Yeah, I know yuh ain't. He told me. Said yuh passed him up like a white chip in a hundred-dollar jack-pot game. But Rocky's all right. Mebbe yuh don't know it, but I found Rocky's sixgun out there near his dead horse. Proved to me that he was there with the horse. Pshaw, he admitted it."

"Well?"

"Uh-huh. One of them two gun-tottin' jaspers is plenty smart. We done a lot of guessin' about that dead horse. The tall feller, name's Hartley, figured out somethin', June." Pinky looked curiously at her. "Do yuh remember the time he and you and Rocky was shootin' at that target down by the corner of that corral fence? Uh-huh. We shot quite a lot of times with yore thirty-thirty.

"On the way out here t'day I made a little search. Up on top of the slope, above the dead horse, and right under a oak tree, I found a thirty-thirty shell. Hartley said I'd likely find one—of some caliber. Then I picked up one of the empties we left beside the corner of the fence.

"Well, sir, they matched. The firin'-pin on that rifle is jist a little off-center and makes a peculiar mark. Uh-huh, they shore did match."

June bit her lower lip, her face half-averted. "Well?"

"I jist wondered," grinned Pinky, "if you was shootin' at Rocky or the horse."

"Have you turned detective, Pinky?"

"Shucks, no! It was Hartley who figured it all out thataway."

"What was Rocky doing in our pasture that night?"

"Well, all I've got is his word for it, June. He said he went there to try and catch the rustlers."

"Do you mind if we sit down, Pinky?" she asked, pointing at a bench beside the wall. "My knees feel shaky."

"Thinkin' how close yuh come to gettin' Rocky Hill that night?"

"I don't want to think about that," she replied, as they sat down. "Pinky, I want

Dan Hickey

you to tell me what you know about Hartley."

Pinky explained what he knew about both Hashknife and Sleepy.

"Are Hartley and Stevens rated as dangerous men?" she asked.

"Dangerous? Well, I dunno. Dangerous to who?"

"I can't answer that, Pinky. Do you know anyone around this country whose initials are B. J."

Pinky thought it over, but shook his head. "I don't know of any. What's the idea, June?"

"I can't tell you now. Thanks a lot for telling me—about Rocky."

"Yo're wlecome," smiled Pinky, picking up his hat and getting to his feet. "Yuh might ride down there and—well, I dunno. Yuh see, Rocky's pretty low. Havin' a lady shoot a horse out from under him—and him havin' to pack that heavy saddle on his back all the way home—and her thinkin' he was a rustler. Well, I'll be driftin'."

IRA BRADLEY, the sheriff, was in his office, when Dan Hickey came in, and he seemed in rather a jovial mood.

"Have yuh had any trace of Hartley or Stevens, Ira?" asked Hickey.

"I quit lookin' for 'em, Dan," smiled the sheriff. "I sent a telegram to the Cattle Association, asking for information about 'em—and got an answer today. Henry Logan, the secretary, told me I was crazy if I thought either of 'em ever murdered anybody, and advised me to work with 'em and I'd find the murderers. He said that Hartley was the best range-detective that ever worked for him."

"Is that so? Well, well!" exclaimed Hickey. "I'll bet it was Hartley that Alden was goin' to hire. Hm-m-m-m. That's about right. I wonder where they went after they left El Caballero last night."

"Mebbe they didn't leave there, Dan."

"Mebbe not. They'll probably come back, when they find that the law don't want 'em."

While they were talking Pinky Caldwell came in from the Alden ranch, and the sheriff told him about the telegram. Pinky grinned.

"Well, they're both down at Rocky's place," he told them. "My hunch is that they're on the trail of the missin' Alden cows. I had a talk with 'em a couple hours ago."

"And you knowin' that I wanted 'em, Pinky?" complained the sheriff.

"Well," explained Pinky, "they took my gun away from me, until I was willin' to listen to reason. It didn't take long—not with two forty-fives squintin' at my middle."

"I wouldn't," agreed the sheriff.

"I was out at the 73 a while ago, Dan," said Pinky. "Just missed yuh. Had a talk with June Alden. Say, do either of you fellers know anybody around this country whose initials are B. J.?"

Neither of them did. "What about 'em?" asked the sheriff.

"June Alden was askin' me if I knowed. She wouldn't tell me what is was about. Funny girl. She asked me to tell her about Hartley and Stevens, and then she asked me if they are dangerous men. I dunno why she wanted to know. I'll betcha a dollar against four-bits that she rides down to Rocky's place."

"She won't even speak to him," said Dan Hickey.

"Oh, I reckon she would—now," grinned Pinky.

"Well, she shouldn't go ridin' around the country alone, until this cattle rustlin' outfit is run out or caught," said Hickey. "Yuh never can tell what Flash Rodriguez might do. He was crazy about her, if yuh remember—and he's a *mucho malo hombre.*"

"Yuh ort to run home and tell her," grinned Pinky.

"That's just what I'm goin' to do," retorted Hickey, and walked out of the office.

Junk Beebee was standing at the hitchrack, talking with Ed Benson. Dan Hickey's conversation with them was short. He and Junk untied their horses, swung into their saddles and rode out of town. Ed Benson went to the general store, picked up a package he had left there, and rode south toward his own ranch.

CHAPTER EIGHT

No Time for Questions

IT WAS just at dusk when June Alden rode in at Rocky's ranch. Hashknife and Sleepy were down at the stable, when she tied her horse at the little porch and met Rocky in the doorway. He was cooking supper. They went inside and closed the door. Hashknife smiled a bit grimly, wondering what had brought June.

"Pinky must have squared things for Rocky," said Sleepy. "I hope she can cook—it's a cinch Rocky can't."

Rocky called to them and they went up to the house where Rocky introduced them to June.

"Pinky told me about you," she said to Hashknife. "I found a note in our patio, and I—I thought you should see it."

She gave it to the tall, lean cowboy, who read it in the light of the lamp. Then she told him about Dan Hickey looking for something.

"The initials D. C. must be for Dick Corey," she said.

"Who is Dick Corey?" he asked.

"A cowboy who used to work for us. Dan Hickey fired him. Dan said he was shot and killed in Arroyo City a short time ago."

"Oh, yeah," Hashknife said thoughtfully. "I remember him now."

Hashknife gave the note to Sleepy, who read it quickly.

"Dangerous, eh?" he grinned.

"Something burning!" exclaimed June, sniffing the air.

"Danged potatoes!" blurted Rocky. "I allus burn 'em."

Rocky rushed into the kitchen, followed by June, who insisted on helping to cook supper.

While supper was being prepared Hashknife went down to the stable. He and Sleepy had recovered their discarded belts and holsters, but they had left the money hidden in the stable. He gave the horses a feed of oats and some fresh bedding. As he placed the pitchfork against the wall he heard a noise from the direction of the house. It was sort of a yelp or a cry.

He sprang into the doorway of the stable. Directly in front of him and fifty feet away was part of the corral fence. It was dark now, but he saw the indistinct blur of a man's figure, half-crouched between him and the fence. Hashknife's right hand flashed back to the butt of his gun, and a pencil of flame lashed out toward him, followed by the smashing of a rifle.

The report of the rifle was echoed by the crack of Hashknife's forty-five, and the man cried out sharply. Before Hashknife could fire again something struck him a stunning blow on the head. He was not knocked out but he lost all sense of locomotion. It seemed to him that he had walked miles when he crashed into a fence and went flat on the ground.

He could hear voices, the sound of horses, but they meant nothing to him. He was content to lie there on his back and look up at the stars, but after a while his mind began to function.

He was lying in the heavy shadow behind the stable. There was dried blood on the right side of his face and neck, and his head felt as though it weighed a ton. However, he was beginning to remember.

It was an effort, but he managed to get to his feet and went stumbling around to the front of the stable. Moonlight flooded the yard. The stable door was wide open. There was a man's hat hanging on top of a fence post. Hashknife examined it for a clue to the man who had shot him—and found it was his own hat.

There was no one in the house. The fire had long since died out in the stove, and the supper, what there was of it, had burned to a crisp. However, there was strong coffee in the pot—and that was what Hashknife needed. He examined his head in a mirror and found that a bullet had ripped his scalp for several inches. The wound had bled freely, and he was afraid to wash it for fear of starting the blood again. It looked fairly clean.

Another cup of strong coffee and a cigarette seemed to clear his head completely. He remembered the voices and the thudding of hoofs.

"They got Sleepy, June and Rocky," he told himself.

PAINFULLY he made his way down to the stable, only to find that all the horses were gone. His saddle was still hanging on its peg against the wall, but the rest of the saddles were gone. He went back to the house, where he sprawled in a rocking-chair, trying to ease the pain in his head. Funny thing, his gun was in his holster. He must have instinctively replaced it, after he was shot.

The lamplight hurt his eyes, so he turned the lamp lower and sat down again. He must have gone to sleep, because daylight was streaming through the windows, and Pinky Caldwell was there, shaking him, asking him what had happened, while Ira Bradley, the sheriff was looking around the room.

"Yo're a hell of a lookin' mess, Hartley," said Pinky.

"Yeah, I guess that's right," agreed Hashknife wearily.

"Where's June Alden and Rocky—and Sleepy?"

"That's why we came down here," explained the sheriff. "June didn't come home. Her mother knew she came here. Dan Hickey and Junk Beebee were playin' poker in Agua Frio almost all night, and when they got back to the ranch Mrs. Alden told them that June hadn't come home; so they came right back to tell me."

"What happened to you?" queried Pinky.

"Me?" Hashknife smiled wryly. "Why, I suppose somebody bounced a bullet off my head."

Hashknife explained what had happened to him.

"Took all the horses and left you stranded, eh?" remarked Pinky.

"I don't reckon it made much difference," said Hashknife.

"It must have been Flash Rodriguez and his gang," said the sheriff.

"You might be right, Sheriff."

"I might, eh? Why do yuh say that?"

"Rodriguez helped me and Sleepy escape in Mexico; so why should he come up here to capture Sleepy and try to kill me?"

"Well, who done it if Rodriguez didn't?"

"I think I'll ask Rodriguez—if you'll find me a horse."

"You mean—go into Mexico?" queried the sheriff.

"I'll go with yuh, Hartley," volunteered Pinky.

"Yo're an officer of the law, Pinky," reminded the sheriff.

"Not after I cross the Border—I ain't. Mebbe I can rope a horse for yuh, Hartley. There's usually a bunch hangin' around. Are yuh particular about color?"

"Give me one with four legs—that's all I want."

Pinky roped a snake-headed roan gelding and Hashknife quickly got into the saddle.

The sheriff tried to induce Pinky to go back to Agua Frio, instead of to Mexico, but Pinky was adamant. They parted at the intersection with the El Caballero road, and the sheriff went galloping back to Agua Frio alone.

El Caballero was quiet. The games at the El Toro were closed. They found Little Casino in the shade of an old adobe wall, his rifle across his lap. His eyes widened at sight of Hashknife and Pinky. Hashknife looked rather wild, bareheaded and blood-stained.

"Where's Flash Rodriguez?" asked Pinky, as they forced their horses in close to the wall.

"Dio mio!" exclaimed Little Casino. *"Quien sabe?"* He pointed at Hashknife. "I never see heem seence you go 'way. Heeneral Rodriguez ees messing and I don't know w'ere the hall ees Beeg Casino."

"Have yuh looked for 'em?" asked Hashknife.

"W'at ees use for lookeeng? Everybody ees say they know notheeng. The cantina ees no good. Nobody dreenk, nobody play the game. W'at the hall ees wrong weeth everytheeng?"

"That don't help us none, Hashknife," observed Pinky sadly.

Hashknife looked glumly at Little Casino. There was no doubt in his mind that the little Mexican was telling the truth. He said:

"Little Casino, do you know where Wentz and Nestor live?"

"Sure. They got leetle shack—"

"Take him on behind you, Pinky," ordered Hashknife. "We might find somebody at Wentz's place. Pile on, Little Casino."

There was only a trail to the tumbledown rancho which Dutch Wentz and Carlos Nestor called their home. The house was a mixture of lumber, poles and adobe, aided and abetted by rusty tin and corrugated iron. There was an old stable, without windows or doors, but there was a big corral in good state of repair.

They came in through a dry wash behind the stable, where they dismounted. There was a lone saddled horse nodding at the front of the house, the only sign of life about the place.

"Carl Nestor's horse," said Pinky.

THE front door opened and a man stood in the doorway, half-turned, looking back into the house. Then he turned his back and seemed to be scratching a match against the door. He threw the match in front of him, and a sudden flame blazed up, causing the man to back hurriedly outside.

Hashknife was walking swiftly across the yard, as the man turned toward his horse. It was Carlos Nestor. For a moment he hesitated, his eyes wide, but with a rasping curse on his lips he reached for his gun. Hashknife had stopped short, aiming as deliberately as though shooting at a target.

Nestor's gun came up swiftly, but not swiftly enough. The heavy bullet from Hashknife's gun smashed solidly into him, knocking him backward, and Nestor's shot

went skyward. Hashknife's second shot drove him off his feet, and he went down against the wall of the old shack. Hashknife ran in swiftly, with Pinky and Little Casino close behind.

Into the burning building they went, where the flames reeked of kerosene, but which had done little damage yet. Lying against the opposite wall, roped together, were Flash Rodriguez and Big Casino. There was no time to cut the ropes; so they picked up the two men bodily and carried them outside. There were no other captives in the house, so there was no use trying to save the old shack.

Except for signs of harsh treatment Flash Rodriguez and Big Casino were uninjured. Walking was rather painful at first, but they went down to the stable, before trying to get any information. Rodriguez looked curiously at the body of Carlos Nestor, as Hashknife dragged it away from the burning building.

Flash Rodriguez shuddered as he looked back at the fire.

"Ver' close, amigo," he told Hashknife. "You come een time."

Flash Rodriguez quickly told his story. After Hashknife and Sleepy had escaped from the El Toro, Dutch Wentz and Nestor had captured him and Big Casino and took them to this place. They blamed him for the escape. Their idea was to take over Rodriguez's herd and sell them across the Border. Rodriguez's foreman was in with them, and they had forced Rodriguez to sign a bill of sale for every head on his ranch.

They had all been gone for quite a while and Rodriguez thought they had been left to starve, until Nestor came back with the information that everything had been fixed up. Then he tied them together, saturated everything with kerosene and set it on fire with a handful of matches. But Nestor had not mentioned anything about June Alden except to say that the *Americanos* would probably be looking all over Mexico for him on a kidnaping charge at least.

"Where were they goin' to sell yore herd?" queried Hashknife.

"They say they mak' deal weeth Beeg Jeem Black. He buy many calf een Mejico. They say he buy cow, too. *Quien sabe?*"

"I wonder if we better go down to Flash's rancho," said Pinky.

"I think I know a better place," Hashknife. "Let's go."

As they doubled up on the horses and rode back to El Caballero Hashknife was singing quietly, but not exactly musically.

"A queer feller, that tall puncher," observed Pinky quietly to Flash Rodriguez, who rode double with him. "His pardner missin', and all that—and him a-singin' thataway."

"I'm theenk," replied Rodriguez gravely, "he ees damn good man for being amigo to me, Peenky."

CHAPTER NINE

Hashknife Heads for Danger

IT WAS late in the afternoon when Sheriff Bradley rode in at Ed Benson's ranch. Bradley was tired and discouraged. He had ridden his bronc to a frazzle, but had not picked up a single clue that might lead him to the missing June Alden, Sleepy Stevens and Rocky Hill.

Benson's ranch, between Agua Frio and the Border, was a down-at-the-heel place, with a sway-backed stable, a nondescript house and a lot of corrals.

Big, hulking Ed Benson came outside, shading his eyes with his hand as he watched the sheriff coming down the road. He nodded grimly as the sheriff dismounted but did not invite him in. They squatted on their heels between the house and the stable.

"Any luck?" queried Ed Benson.

"Not a bit," replied the sheriff wearily.

"Mrs. Alden's in town. Everybody seems to think that Flash Rodriguez done it. I reckon they're right. Some of the boys wanted to go raidin' into Mexico. I dunno—mebbe they're right."

Ed Benson nodded. "Where's Pinky Caldwell?" he asked.

"Pinky? Oh, he's in Mexico, I reckon."

"He's down there, eh? Go alone?"

"Him and Hartley went down, Ed."

"Hartley? Oh, yeah—the tall puncher. Well, what—oh, I see. They went down there, lookin' for the girl."

"Yeah. Pinky wanted to go along. Yuh see, Hartley's pardner is missin', too."

A gust of wind stirred up the dust and swirled it into them. It also blew the stable door open. The sheriff was looking in that direction, and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Finally he straightened up, shifted his belt and drew a deep breath.

"Well, I reckon I'll be driftin', Ed," he said quietly.

"I don't believe yuh will," replied Ed Benson tensely. He had drawn his gun, and the muzzle was only inches away from the sheriff's body.

"I don't think yo're goin' any place, Sheriff," he continued slowly. "Yuh might be wonderin' what all them saddled horses are doin' in that stable. Blast that wind, anyway! Allus somethin'."

The sheriff cleared his throat. "Horses?" he queried huskily.

"Yea—horses! You seen 'em. Turn around, so I can get yore gun, Ira. That's fine. Jist walk ahead of me to the kitchen door and don't make any foolish breaks."

"I still don't savvy what yo're tryin' to do, Ed."

"Protect my own skin—if yo're too dumb to understand."

Ed Benson herded the sheriff into the main room, where two masked men sat against the wall. The light was dim, but the sheriff could see another man on a cot. The air reeked of tobacco smoke and liniment.

"The wind blew the stable door open, and he saw the horses," said Ed Benson. "I jist had to keep him here."

The other men made no comment, but merely watched Ed Benson herd the the sheriff into an adjoining room. The two men went into the kitchen, where the sheriff heard them talking, but he was unable to identify any voices. The sick man stirred under the blankets, mumbling foolishly. Ed Benson came back and looked him over.

The sheriff made a shrewd guess that this was the man who had traded bullets with Hashknife Hartley at Rocky's ranch.

"I don't quite get yore idea in all this, Ed," remarked the sheriff. "You know blamed well that the shootin' of Horace was an accident."

"Ain't you bright?" sneered Ed Benson.

ED WENT back to the kitchen, closing the door. The sheriff tried his bonds, but found them unyielding. A breeze through the house opened the connecting door a few inches, and the voices were audible now. They were talking about Hartley and Pinky. Said one:

"I'll be more satisfied when Carl shows up and tells us that everythin' is settled down there. I don't like the idea of Hartley headin' for Mexico. One of us should have gone along."

"We made a mistake, when we didn't guard that Border," said Ed Benson. "Slim was so sure he had killed Hartley. We should have made more of a search for him. There was blood on the stable floor and blood on the fence, where he crawled through. He must have been hit hard—to lose all that blood."

"He must have been hit damned hard," sneered a heavy voice. "Now that we've got the sheriff—what's to be done?"

One of the men chuckled. "I've got it. The sheriff led a posse into Mexico, lookin' for Flash Rodriguez and the girl. The

sheriff and his posse didn't come back—except mebbe one of us. Flash Rodriguez and the girl went south. How's that?"

"That's a great idea," remarked the heavy voice. "Danged if that ain't good. And yuh can bring the bodies back to Agua Frio. They'll never find Flash and the girl."

"Here comes two of the boys," said Benson.

He went outside, and in a few minutes the three men came in.

"Don't call any names," warned the heavy voice.

"We heard about the sheriff," replied a new voice. "And Ed told us about Hartley. No wonder we couldn't find any trace of him. His saddle was gone. Must have caught a horse. What's to be done next?"

Ed Benson outlined the latest scheme to them, but added:

"We've got to get Hartley and Pinky before we're safe."

"How's the sick man?"

"Pretty bad. Won't live through the night. We'll just have to chuck him in a hole and swear we never seen him in this country."

"Wouldn't anybody look for him around here, anyway," remarked the heavy voice. "I wish Carl would show up."

"Here he comes now!" exclaimed Ed Benson.

"Are yuh sure?"

"I'd know that blaze-faced bay anywhere. That's Carl all right. I'll go out and tell him a few things, before he comes in."

Hashknife Hartley rode the blaze-faced bay straight to the old stable. He had no idea just what to do, except that he felt sure he was riding straight into the danger spot. He saw a bareheaded man leave the house, going to the stable. Hashknife was taller than Carlos Nestor, but he slouched in his saddle a little. Ed Benson was opening the stable door, talking excitedly, before he recognized Hashknife. His jaw sagged and he made a half-hearted motion toward his holstered gun—but stopped.

Hashknife dismounted slowly, his gun tensed at his hip, concealed by his body from anyone in the house.

"Open the door and back in, Benson," he ordered. "I'll close it myself. That's right—you'll learn. My, my! What a lot of horses you have! And all saddled and bridled, too. Wonderin' about that horse, eh? I inherited it from a dead man. A friend of yours, I reckon. He built a little fire in Mexico, but all he burned was a shack and don't forget that he talked."

"The yaller pup!" gritted Benson. There was no thought in his mind that Hashknife might be bluffing the truth.

"Now that yo're here, Hartley—what good is it?" he asked. "That house is full of guns. One move out of you and they'll blast yuh off the earth. They're waitin' for yuh to show up."

"Is that so? That's why you walked down here and let me trap yuh so easily, eh? Yuh wanted to warn me. Nice of yuh, Benson."

"I thought you was Carl Nestor."

"I hoped you would. Yuh see—oh-oh! Yuh would, eh?"

Ed Benson had suddenly reached for his gun, but before he could draw it Hashknife slashed him over his right ear with the barrel of his forty-five. He fell back against the wall, slid to the floor of the stable, lay still.

HASHKNIFE glanced about and spotted the sagging rear-door. As fast as Hashknife could work he yanked the saddles off horses and drove them outside, until only his own horse was left. Then he went back to the front door and peered through the cracks at the house.

The four men in the kitchen anxiously awaited the return of Ed Benson, bringing Carlos Nestor. One of them had seen the two men enter the stable.

"Takin' a long time down there," growled one of the men. "I'd like to hear if Carl for sure cleaned up all right down there."

He got up and went over to a dirty window, peering out.

"Hey! What's goin' on?" he blurted. "Our horses are all loose and unsaddled. Look at 'em! They're headin' for the water hole."

The other three men made a rush for the little window.

"Somebody turned 'em out the back way! Why—Ed's down there!"

"We've got to have horses!" roared the heavy-voiced man. "I never could catch my horse—on foot. Get out there quick and snag one of 'em, before they all pull out."

"Wait a minute!" snapped one of the men. "I don't like the looks of this. Ed wouldn't do that. I wonder if that was Carl Nestor or whether it was somebody else."

"What do yuh mean?"

"Mean? I mean that somebody on Carl's horse has trapped Ed in the stable—and turned our broncs loose."

"Hartley?"

"Who else? Pinky Caldwell ain't got that much sense."

"Well, suppose it is Hartley. We're four to his one."

"You fool!" the other man rasped. "Don'tcha realize what he's done? He ain't alone. He's sent word to town for help. He's turned our horses loose; so we can't get away. Suppose we are four to one. He can keep us bottled up until the others arrive."

One of them went in to look at the sheriff and the sick man. He whirled and darted back into the kitchen.

"Listen!" he blurted out. "We're surrounded! There was a man peekin' through the window at the end of the other room. He ducked, when he seen me."

CHAPTER TEN

Blaze of Disaster

CRASH! Window glass rattled, and something thumped heavily on the floor. One of the men sprang into the main room, his forty-five spitting flame toward a broken window. In the middle of the floor was a ten-pound rock. From outside mocking laughter drifted in.

The four men stampeded to the kitchen again. One man ripped the mask from his face, disclosing the features of Dan Hickey, foreman of the Alden spread.

"To hell with it!" he snapped. "If I've got to shoot my way out of this place, I want to see what I'm shootin' at. And I'm goin' out right now."

He flung the kitchen door open and dashed outside, his gun held high. He ran a dozen steps, stopped and whirled, looking for an enemy. Somewhere a gun cracked wickedly, knocking Dan's right leg from under him, and he sat down heavily, his hat flying aside.

"How you like from those, amigo?" inquired Big Casino from around a corner of the house. Dan spun around in a sitting position and fired toward the corner. From down at the stable came Hashknife's voice:

"All right, Hickey, throw that gun away—yo're through."

Dan swore savagely, and fired two more shots at the stable door. There was a muffled thud from the stable, and Hickey sprawled over backward.

"Hickey's through worryin'," remarked one of the three remaining defenders callously, peering through a window.

"I wonder if we can make a deal with 'em," said the heavy-voiced man huskily.

"What kind of a deal?"

"They know what we've got in that back room. We'll trade 'em four for three. All we ask is a chance to reach the Border. To hell with the sick man—he don't count.

Call and see if Hartley will answer yuh."

One of the men knocked a pane of glass from the window, and shouted Hashknife's name. Hashknife answered, and the man shouted out the terms of the trade.

"And if we don't trade?" queried Hashknife.

"We'll cut four throats and take our chances, Hartley."

"Give me fifteen minutes."

"All right. We'll wait."

"That'll stop 'em," said the heavy-voiced man. "We'll keep our masks on. Once we get across the Border, we're safe. But I'll kill Hartley if it's the last thing I ever do. Is there any whiskey around this place?"

A bottle was produced and they all drank heavily, sitting down in that darkened kitchen, waiting for the verdict of the conference. One of the men paused and lowered the bottle.

"Hartley was alone in the stable," he remarked. "How was he goin' to have a conference with anybody? Wait a minute. I'm goin' to see if I can spot anybody from that busted window."

He went carefully across the room, past the mumbling figure on the bed and came to the window. The heavy rock and the bullets had smashed it completely. He listened closely, but there was no sound. Then he went to his knees, shoved his head slowly outside and turned to look up and down the building. Between him and the front corner stood Big Casino, but before the man could get more than a glimpse of the big Mexican, something struck him solidly on the head, and he slumped without a sound.

The other two men had another drink, moving around uneasily, waiting for the other man to return. He finally came to the doorway.

"What'd yuh see—anythin'?" queried one of them.

"No," he grunted and stepped into the kitchen. One of them handed him the bottle, and looked squarely into the grim, gray features of Hashknife Hartley. The other man had stepped to the broken kitchen window, peering outside.

As the man opened his mouth to yell a warning Hashknife drove a left hook at his unprotected chin, but his heel had slipped on a grease spot on the floor, and the heavy blow barely glanced off his left shoulder. Their bodies thudded together and they went down against the stove, knocking it aside. The man screamed:

"Hartley!"

A shower of soot from the disjointed stovepipe clouded the air for a moment and the other man, frightened and confused, threw open the kitchen door and dashed into the yard. Like Dan Hickey he whirled, tearing off his mask.

He fired one shot toward a corner of the house, as a missile came whirling out of the gloom. He tried to dodge it, but too late. It knocked his legs from under him, his six-shooter flying out of his hand, while behind the thrown rifle came Big Casino and Little Casino, running at top speed, like a quarterback and a fullback, and threw themselves full length upon the prostrate gunman.

PINKY CALDWELL and Flash Rodriguez ran around the corner and headed for the open doorway, just as Hashknife staggered out, dragging his victim by the collar. Hashknife's head and face was as black as ink.

"My stars!" blurted Pinky. "This must be Uncle Tom's cabin!"

"Mr. Wentz and me been keepin' house!" panted Hashknife.

Big Casino was hopping up and down yelling:

"How you like from those, amigo? Tak' shot from me, eh? I twis' both your ear off if you don't kip still. How you like the way my lettle brodder throw hees rifle? Pretty good, eh?"

The mask had been torn away, and the

heavy features, blood-stained now, of Big Jim Black were visible. One leg was broken, when the whirling rifle struck him. Hashknife was in the house, smashing open the doors to the small rooms, where June Alden, Sleepy Stevens, Rocky Hill and Ira Bradley, the sheriff, had been bound and locked in.

The prisoners were quickly released, and a lamp was lighted in the main room, where Junk Beebee sprawled on the floor, still unconscious from the blow Hashknife had struck him from outside the window. Ira Bradley pointed at the man on the cot.

"Hartley, that's Ed Wells, the sheriff from Arroyo City."

"I know it. He's got one of my bullets in him. Wells was the man who tried to kill me last night at Rocky's place. Yuh see, he was in on the deal with—"

Big Casino and Little Casino came in, dragging Big Jim Black, who was cursing painfully.

"Big Jim!" blurted the sheriff "What in the devil!"

Bradley stared at Hashknife, waiting for an explanation.

"Big Jim received Alden's cattle," said Hashknife. "I remembered that Box 48 brand. Alden's punchers botched the 73, makin' it an easy job to run the Box 48 over it. Dan Hickey and Junk Beebee helped Ed Benson and his brother put the cattle across the Border, where Dutch Wentz and Carlos Nestor picked up the herd, drove them inside the Border to Arroyo City, where they shoved 'em over the line, and Big Jim's outfit re-branded and shipped 'em. Ed Wells got his cut for passin' 'em.

"Dick Corey was the go-between, it seems. Big Jim gave him twenty-two hundred to give to Dan Hickey. But some of Big Jim's outfit killed Corey, and missed out on the money. I've got that money. Big Jim wrote a note to Dan Hickey and Dan lost the note. June Alden found—"

"Why, I didn't know anythin' like this was goin' on," wailed the sheriff. "Why wasn't I told?"

"W'y don't you ask us?" replied Big Casino loftily.

"They walked in and got us cold," complained Sleepy. "We didn't have a Chinaman's chance, Hashknife. They said you was dead."

"He shore looks like he was mortifyin'," chuckled Pinky.

"How did you learn all this? asked Big Jim in a husky whisper.

"Oh, I guessed a lot of it," smiled Hashknife. "Yore gang made foolish mistakes —killin' Nick Starr, after yuh had a man write letters two days after he died. Who killed Henry Alden, Black?"

"Do some more guessin'," rasped Big Jim painfully. "I told the fools to fade out and not monkey with you. I didn't think that we'd end up like this. Got a piece of paper and a pencil?"

Somebody found a sheet of paper and a pencil. Sleepy put the lamp down beside him, and they all stood around while he wrote:

This is an addition to my last will and testament, which will be found in my safe at Arroyo City. I hereby bequeath to Mrs. Henry Alden, owner of the 73 outfit, a sum of money equivalent to the number of cattle I have stolen from her ranch, or a like number of my Box 48 outfit cattle. The list is in a book, locked in my ranch safe. All the stolen cattle are listed in red ink. This is merely restitution and I ask the Arroyo City Bank to see that these provisions are carried out.

James G. Black.

Black signed his name and handed the paper to Hashknife, who placed the lamp on the table. The others moved over beside Hashknife.

"But this is a will," he said. "Only good after yo're dead."

A heavy, muffled shot thudded in the room, and everyone whirled.

"My stars!" Pinky blurted out. "Where'd he git that gun?"

"I geeve it to heem," replied Little Casino blandly. "He lose eet, w'en I knock hees legs out from onder me."

"I guess it's all right," said Hashknife. "It's easier that way."

June shuddered, when Hashknife handed her the paper.

"That saves the 73 spread," he told her. "Hickey's gone; so you'll need a new foreman. I'd advise yuh to take Rocky."

FLASH RODRIGUEZ came up to Hashknife and held out his hand. They looked keenly at each other for several moments. Flash tried to say something, but stopped. They gripped hands for a moment and Flash said:

"Amigo, w'at I have belong to you."

"The same ees for me and my leetle brodder," declared Big Casino. "Everytheeng you own belong to me, and everytheeng I own belong to my leetle brodder, or I am a beeg liar and a thief."

"That's swell," said Hashknife gravely. "Thank yuh a lot."

Sleepy followed him outside, and they went down to the stable.

Sleepy's horse was still there, along with Hashknife's mount. They led the two horses through the back doorway, mounted and cut off across the hills toward Agua Frio. They heard the sheriff calling their names, but they did not answer.

"We'll go straight through to Vacaville, Sleepy," said Hashknife.

"Suits me, pardner. I was scared for a while that I'd never fork a bronc again."

"Scared yuh?"

"Until I heard that they was worryin' over the fact that you wasn't dead. That was shore cheerful news. But what about that bundle of money?"

"Oh, yeah. Do yuh reckon June Alden will marry Rocky Hill?"

"Jist as sure as anythin' in the world. Why?"

"Oh, I jist wanted to be sure. If yuh didn't think so, we'd go back and take that package of money out of Rocky's coat pocket. I'd sure hate to give a weddin' present—and not have a weddin'."

And they went along, riding knee-to-knee, with only the soft thudding of hoofs on the dusty road and the jingle of bit-chains to mark their passing from the Valley of the Cold Water.

THE END

EAT MY POWDERSMOKE — OR BLOW!

By Thomas Thompson

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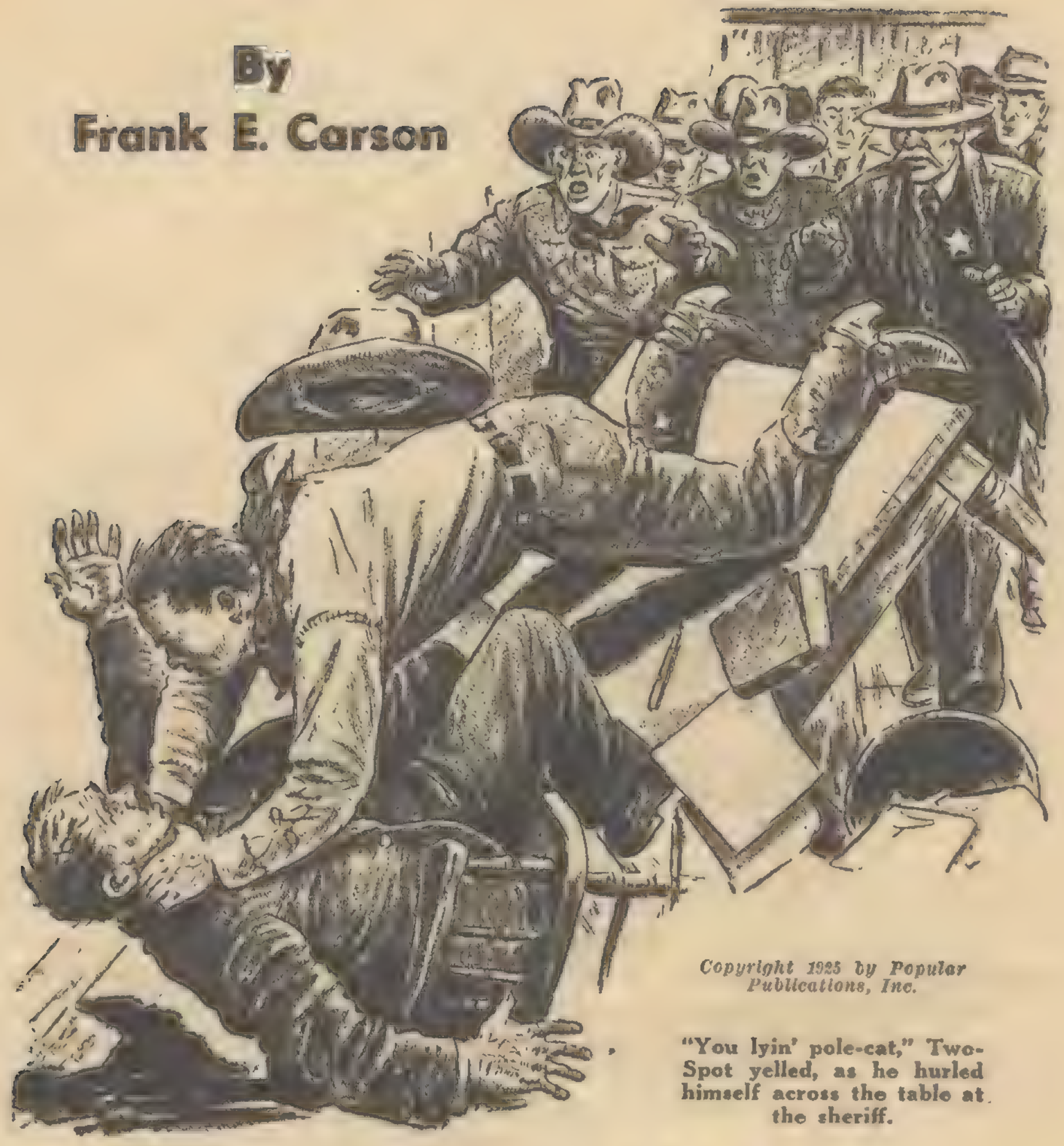

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"You lyin' pole-cat," Two-Spot yelled, as he hurled himself across the table at the sheriff.

TWO-SPOT RIDES A HUNCH

It was all for one and one for all—when three hoosegow-bound cowpokes found themselves at the mercy of a trigger-happy lawdog.

TIFF MATTHEWS, cowpuncher, five hundred miles from the home range and fervently wishing he had never left it, extended an eager hand for the telegram which the clerk at the Amer-

ican House proffered over the desk. As he read it his lower jaw sagged and with a muttered imprecation he swung about and clanked noisily across the lobby toward a swinging door which bore the faded legend BAR and BILLIARDS.

Inside, at a far table, Two-Spot Orth and Sim Eason were deep in a friendly game of pool. Toward them the scowling invader made his way.

Two-Spot, diminutive and rosy-cheeked beneath his tan, banked the four ball and waved an airy greeting. "Good news, Sim," he grinned at his fellow player, "I can tell by the look on his melancholy map."

With a disgusted grunt Tiff tossed the paper down on the green topped table and flopped heavily into the nearest chair. Retrieving it Two-Spot tilted his wide brimmed Stetson back off his forehead and read aloud.

"You birds flew away from the Z-Bar-Z under your own power, you can fly back via same.

J. Connors."

A fog of silence enveloped the trio of punchers. This wasn't exactly the sort of reply they had expected. Sim—tall, bony, freckled of face—finally drawled a comment:

"Now I calls that downright unhospitable of the old man."

Two-Spot crumpled the offensive message into a ball and flipped it across the room.

"Unhospitable ain't the word," he shrugged, reaching for his cue. "It's just plumb ornery of him. We hadn't oughta go back at all."

"Go back!" yelped Tiff, riled at their taking it so calmly. "How th' hell are we gonna go any place, that's what I wanta know? Why, we—"

"I'm shootin' the round ball for the corner pocket, Sim," Two-Spot announced languidly.

"Let 'er buck," said Sim, reaching for the makings.

Tiff broke off short his tirade, glared murder at them, then strode angrily from the room. Upstairs he removed his boots, flung himself across the bed and cursed the day he had left the Z-Bar-Z for this. To be sure it had sounded fine from the lips of the agent of the World's Colossal Rodeo Circus and Congress of Wild West Riders; thirty dollars a week, excellent grub, a new town every day, cheering thousands, fair feminine admirers galore.

Oh, it had been a romantic, rose-tinted picture. But alas! The rude awakening. Disillusionment first; and now they were stranded and jobless in a tiny Kansas farm town. Joe Connors' refusal to finance a return trip was the final link in an unbroken chain of disasters.

AFTER supper the trio held a powwow. A careful survey of their resources—cash and otherwise—revealed a dollar and eighty-five cents, mostly in possession of the frugal Tiff; the outfits they wore, a non-running two-dollar watch and a battered straw suit case practically empty. Already they had been guests of the American House for three days, making their indebtedness for board and lodging, an even twenty-seven dollars.

"Not so good," ventured Sim, from a recumbent position upon the bed.

Two-Spot sighed and rolled a smoke.

"No," he admitted frankly, "we ain't exactly what you'd call solvent."

"An' the longer we stay here the worse off we get," Tiff informed them morbidly.

"Tiffie," said Two-Spot severely, "I wisht you wouldn't be so danged pessermistic. You oughta break yourself to look on the bright side of things more."

Tiff swore savagely.

"Now you take me an' Sim, here," Two-Spot continued. "We're different—being optermistic by nature."

"You're a pair of lop-eared, ring-tailed

jackasses!" Tiff snorted with impatience.

The diminutive puncher rose to his feet and bowed elaborately. "Please to've met up with you, brother," he said, "an' if you'll excuse us we'll be siftin' along now. Sim an' me are dated up to tote them two eye-wideners who sling grub down in the dinin' room over to the Bijou Dream.

"An' by the way," he added as an afterthought, "you'd better slip us the loan of that extra buck you're packin'. We'll prob'ly want an ice cream sody a little after the show."

By morning however, lacking financial means for enjoying their customary pool game, even Two-Spot and Sim began to feel the pinch of circumstances. This day dragged slowly; the three punchers spent most of it in the hotel lobby in melancholy meditation. At nine o'clock they plugged listlessly upstairs to bed determined to wire another heart-rending appeal—collect—to the boss of the Z-Bar-Z in the morning.

Burglars were abroad in Clarksville during the night. The post office safe was rifled of a small amount of cash and stamps and the town livery, three doors from the American House, was touched for several hundred dollars worth of wheels and equipment. The news spread over the village like a fire in a dry pine forest and all Main Street was buzzing with excitement from daylight on.

At a quarter to ten the town marshal, accompanied by three newly-deputized citizens, burst into the hotel dining room and advanced threateningly upon the trio of belated breakfasters.

"Hey, you!" The marshal, a stocky, middle-aged man, his streaked gray mustache fairly bristling with importance, pointed a menacing finger. "What do you fellas know about the rob'ry?"

Two-Spot, whose back was toward the intruders, turned and glared at them. "Who wants to know?" he inquired.

"I do," declared the officer, tapping his badge. "And I want to know all about it right now."

"Why, we don't know nothing about it," Sim spoke up, "except what Miss Erickson, here," he indicated the frightened waitress, "has just been relatin' to us."

"Where was you fellas between midnight last night and five o'clock this morning?"

"Now, sheriff," Sim's drawl was reproving, "you surely ain't insinuatin' that we—"

"None o' your smart aleckin', young fella," thundered the angry questioner. "I guess I'll just take the whole passel of you over to the station for some questionin'."

Two-Spot jumped to his feet, eyes blazing. "The hell you will!" he howled. "Why, you—"

"Git your hats!" commanded the marshal, whipping out a big gun. "Watch 'em, boys," to his deputies. "Don't let 'em start nothin'. Come on now—make it snappy!"

A STOLID, red-faced spectacled citizen of evident importance in the community awaited the officers and their protesting prisoners in the tiny engine room of the village hall. Outside the gaping crowd milled about the doors and windows. There wasn't room inside for any but the principals.

"Well," demanded the portly personage, after surveying the culprits for a moment over the tops of his glasses, "what have you got to say for yourselves?"

"I'm sayin' this is a damned outrage!" Two-Spot exploded violently. "An' if you reckon we're gonna stand for it without buckin' you're plumb loco!"

"H'm," severely, "that kind of talk won't get you anything, young man."

"Th' hell it won't!" screamed Two-Spot, purple-faced and raging. "Well, let me tell you something, you four-eyed ol' buzzard—"

Simultaneously two ungentle elbows connected with Two-Spots' ribs; one from the right, the other from his left. Both Sim and Tiff realized that antagonizing the local authorities would only make matters worse and between them they prodded their pugnacious companion to a glowering, muttering silence.

"Mister," said Sim, assuming the role of spokesman, "this here little shindig, as my-pard says, is plumb onreasonable an' insultin' to us three peaceable, law abidin' strangers. However, if you're set on pesterin' us about something we don't know anything about, just blaze away an' we'll answer square an' truthful. Then if you ain't objectin', we'd admire to go along about our business."

The portly native nodded at the logic in Sim's remarks. He leaned back in his chair and hooked thumbs in the arm holes of his vest. "You—er—you fellows have been hanging around town for several days, haven't you?" he began officiously.

"Since Monday morning," Sim made reply.

"H'm this is Saturday. Your occupations are—"

"We're cowpunchers, mister; but we've been herdin' with a rodeo circus for a short spell."

"A circus, eh?" The magistrate permitted himself to frown. "You have left the circus, I take it?" he suggested.

"No sir," said Sim truthfully. "The circus left us. It went bust in Topeka last week."

"Topeka—"

"It was thisaway, mister," Sim forestalled the other's question. "After the show blowed up we aimed to start siftin' for the home range—that's the Z-Bar-Z up in Wyoming. Bein' flat broke we soaked our guns an' a couple cheap watches an' a set of silver spurs Tiff here won at Cheyenne some years back, but it wasn't enough, nowheres near enough. Well, we stampeded around Topeka until the next day an' then Two-Spot here happens to recollect havin' a rich uncle in Clarksville; so we train rode over here. An' then the dang fool recalls it was Clarksville, Illinoy, instead of Clarksville, Kansas, where his uncle lived. Two-Spot is plumb careless an' forgetful that away."

"But how was I—" Two-Spot attempted to butt in.

"Silence!" thundered the portly magistrate, pounding the table with his fist. It was plain he had taken a violent dislike to Two-Spot. "Go on," he motioned to Sim.

"Well," the tall cowboy drawled, "Two-Spot sent off a telegram to Clarksville, Illinoy, an' we waited three days an' nary got an answer. I reckon the old jasper's died, or moved away, or maybe Two-Spot didn't get his address right again. Anyway, we gave him up an' got off a wire to Joe Connors—Joe's owner of the Z-Bar-Z—an' Joe—er—well—Joe wasn't exactly in good humor when it reached him an' he—"

The other raised his bulk halfway out of his chair and pointed a dramatic finger. "And he turned you down!" he thundered. "So you resorted to burglary last night!"

Sim's freckled face went red, his eyes glittered dangerously as he took a step forward.

"You lyin' polecat!" Two-Spot hurled himself across the table as he spat out the words, and before amazed officers or friends could interfere, he had the portly magistrate's thick neck between his hands. The chair toppled backward under the attack and both men crashed to the floor—Two-Spot on top.

SIM and Tiff and the officers hauled him off, squirming and kicking. The justice, purple-faced and gasping for breath, rose on wobbly legs and leaned against the wall for support.

"Take 'em away, Hankins!" he commanded, as soon as he could talk coherent-

ly. "Lock 'em up—all three of 'em! Crooks or no crooks a couple of days in our coolers back there will teach 'em—especially that vicious little one there—some respect for the law."

From a horizontal position upon one of the wall bunks in his steel boudoir Sim Eason gazed mournfully up at the grimy ceiling. "Well, Two-Spot," he drawled, "you sure played hell, you did."

Tiff, head in hand, groaned a dismal echo from the opposite cot.

The fiery Two-Spot, who had been pacing the narrow confines of the adjoining cell, turned on them like a snarling wolf. "Go ahead—blame me!" he yelped. "Because I had guts enough to tie into that lyin' ol' buzzard."

Sim yawned and raised himself on one elbow. "It ain't your guts we're criticizin', ol' timer," he replied gently, "It's your judgment. I admit he spoke fightin' words, but it was plumb wrongful of you to go loco thataway. That fat jasper is all riled up now an' they'll do their dangdest to rawhide us for something or other."

Two-Spot swore stubbornly and resumed his pacing.

About one o'clock the doughty Clarksville constable appeared with a trip of hot beef sandwiches, a large dish of mashed potatoes and a pitcher of coffee.

"M-m-m, not so bad," Sim commented generously from between mouthfuls of food. "But you've forgot my apple pie, sheriff. I was sort of brung up on pie, an' a meal don't seem natural without it."

"Huh," grunted the marshal, who had lighted his pipe and was eyeing his charges from a chair propped against the wall alongside the outer door. "Law-breakers ain't entitled to no luxuries—not in Clarksville."

The three punchers ate for a time in silence. Two-Spot and Tiff were glum; Sim was thoughtful.

"Sheriff," the latter spoke up, toward the end of the meal, "do you reckon we could settle this here little misunderstanding between us peaceable like an' outa court, so to speak? Now, say if Two-Spot here would apologize to that big feller for losin' his temper an'—"

"I won't apologize!" Two-Spot broke in belligerently.

"It wouldn't do you no good if you did," declared the marshal with a solemn shake of the head. "No, sir; I've had my eyes on you fellas all week. I sized you up as crooks the minute I saw you git off the number-eleven Monday morning, an' I been in the business too long to be fooled by cowboy outfits or any other kind of disguises. Your story's dang fishy an' I'm workin' on some red hot clews right now that'll put you fellas in the penitentiary where you belong. An' you don't need to try no monkey shines neither."

"Monkey shines?" Sim asked innocently. "What's them?"

The marshal rose and tapped his pipe against the stove. "Couple of your breed broke outa jail over at Clover Point just last week—fellas on the outside slipped 'em a file. But there ain't going to be nothin' like that here in Clarksville. When I got a prisoner I do my sleepin'—if any—right in this here chair, an' if you've got any confed'rates on the outside you better warn 'em to stay away. I do my shootin' first and my arguin' afterward." He patted his gun pocket affectionately.

"Ever kill anybody, sheriff?" Sim inquired.

"Not yet, but that ain't sayin' I won't."

WHEN he had gathered up the soiled dishes the marshal paused irresolutely in the doorway, then deposited the tray on a chair and came back slowly toward the barred cells. A shrewd expression had replaced the stern look on his grizzled face. For a moment he stood there watching his prisoners.

"Now listen, boys," he finally began soothingly, "why not come clean on this

rob'ry and tell what you've done with the swag. I can get you off purty light if you do—an' if you don't," he glared menacingly, "I'll see to it that you get the limit."

"Oh, ho," Sim mocked. "You're third degreeing us, eh, sheriff?"

The other flushed under the taunt. "I'm just givin' you young smart alecs a danged good piece of advice," he shot back angrily. "You won't confess, eh?"

Sim shook his head, grinning. "Nary a confess, sheriff."

"We ain't done nothin' to confess!" cried Tiff.

"Go to the devil!" snapped Two-Spot.

The phlegmatic Sim snored peacefully through most of the afternoon. Tiff spent it in dreary contemplation of their plight. Two-Spot, his spirit still untamed, cursed himself out of breath and then sank down to a thinking position on his steel bunk. He was unusually quiet during the evening meal, but the moment the constable had departed he turned to the occupants of the other cage.

"Do you hombres crave bustin' loose from this tin can?" he asks abruptly.

Both blinked their astonishment. Sim spoke first. "Quit kiddin'," he said.

"I ain't kiddin'," Two-Spot shot back. "Do you or don't you?"

Sim lit another smoke. "I do," he replied. "The grub here ain't so bad, but the confinement is commencin' to affect my complexion, also my disposition. What do we do—dig or dynamite?"

"Cripes! What's the use of bustin' out?" Tiff protested. "That'll sure make us look guilty; an' we ain't got any money, an' we can't—"

"All right, you stick!" Two-Spot cut in. "But I'm lopin' outa this corral tonight just to show that windy ol' shorthorn with the tin star I can do it."

"It's sort of a matter of pride, Tiff," Sim explained patiently.

"Oh, I'll ride along if you're dead set on goin'," said Tiff. "But how are we gonna get out without makin' a commotion?"

Two-Spot edged closer to the barred barrier between them, and in a lowered voice explained his plan.

When the Clarksville marshal looked in on his guests at eleven o'clock they were slumbering audibly. He gave a chuckle and settled down in a chair under the room's solitary electric bulb with his paper and a magazine. By midnight his pipe went out, the magazine had slipped to the floor, and the reverberations from his nasal buzzsaw were threatening to wreck the windows. At twelve-fifteen he was awakened by a violent commotion.

Leaping to his feet, he reached instinctively for his gun and whirled toward the cages. Groan after groan issued from the shadowy depths. Closer inspection revealed a figure writhing and squirming on the floor of the cell on the right with another figure bending solicitously over him.

"What's the matter?" the marshal called excitedly through the bars.

Sim turned and looked up, his face showed pale and anxious in the feeble light. "That you sheriff?" he cried. "Gosh, I'm glad you woke up! He's havin' one of his heart spells."

"S'pose I better get a doctor?" Hankins peered in upon the writhing sufferer.

"Yes—an' quick! Here—help me lift him back on his bunk before you go. The doc says flat on his back with both arms danglin' below his body when he's in one of these spells, or he's a goner."

For a second the doughty officer hesitated. He flashed a quick glance into the adjoining cell, where Two-Spot lay sleeping apparently, through it all.

"For Pete's sake, man, hurry!" Sim begged, with a frantic tug at the prostrate form whose moans and struggles were growing feebler. "Gosh!"—as all sound and movement ceased—"I guess he's gone." Sim dropped to his knees and placed an ear against the heart of the suf-

ferer. There was a long, hushed silence.

THE marshal hesitated no longer. Whipping a bunch of keys from his pocket, he fumbled tremblingly among them, unlocked the cell door, and sprang outside.

"You take his head," he commanded hoarsely, "an' I'll—"

The recumbent Tiff attacked from below, Sim from above. In a twinkling they had the surprised officer on the floor with a handkerchief stuffed firmly in his mouth. Binding his arms and legs with previously prepared strips of blanket was but the work of an instant.

Then, adjusting the gag more securely, the two punchers lifted their helpless captive to one of the bunks and made him as comfortable as possible.

"This pains us terrible, sheriff," Tiff apologized, "but we gotta do it."

Locking the cell door behind their exit, they released the alert and grinning Two-Spot, deposited the keys on the floor just outside the door—and alongside the marshal's gun which Sim refused to allow Two-Spot to take—and snapped out the light. A moment later the trio emerged from the side door of the village hall and made their way quietly down the deserted street.

Two hours later, in the shadowy seclusion of a clump of woods, the three sank to the ground in utter exhaustion. Perspiration poured in rivulets from their tired bodies, and their legs, bent and warped from years in the saddle, quivered and twitched convulsively under the unaccustomed exercise.

"Wow!" panted Sim in the direction of the stars. "I'd give a million bucks for that little ol' Bill hoss of mine. I can't hoof another foot if the whole dang county is trailin' us."

"Ner me," wheezed Tiff, drawing a feeble arm across his moist forehead and peering helplessly about them. "Where th' hell do you s'pose we are?"

Two-Spot elbowed himself to a sitting position against a tree and reached for the makings.

"Yuh c'n search me," he answered. "But what we gotta do is keep pluggin' on till we get our bearin's."

"Go ahead an' plug—but deal me out," came from Sim, who had removed his boot and was giving dismal attention to a huge blister on his foot. "Cripes!" he moaned fervently. "I wisht I'd stayed in jail."

"I told yuh we was boobs for—"

Two-Spot interrupted Tiff's plaintive whine with an imprecation.

"Coyotes!" he barked out contemptuously. "Why them galoots back there won't miss us afore nine or ten o'clock, an' by then we oughta be—What's that?" He broke off abruptly and leaned forward in a listening attitude.

The faint thudding of hoofs and the rumble of a moving object smote their ears out of the dark stillness. Petrified, tense with suspense, they sat and listened. It was coming nearer. A moving pencil of light flashed suddenly among the trees and undergrowth to their left, and as suddenly vanished. The rumbling grew louder.

"They're trailin' us already!" Tiff whispered hoarsely.

Two-Spot uttered a sharp command.

"Back—in the bushes—quick!"

Half walking, half crawling, the fugitives scrambled for the shelter of a dark mass of foliage. From here they peered breathlessly out at the moving object which loomed into view. On came a light wagon drawn by two sturdy horses, weaving a cautious way through the trees and around broken stumps. Passing within a few feet of their former position, it veered sharply to the left and rumbled on.

Two-Spot was the first to find his tongue.

"It's a cinch they ain't after us," he whispered. "An' they're sure headin' some place. Let's trail 'em—it'll get us outa this damn jungle anyway. Come on

—mebbe we can bum a ride from them."

WITH Two-Spot in the lead and Sim bobbing painfully and profanely in the rear, the three punchers set out after the wagon. They had barely got under way, however, when it swerved abruptly and dipped from view with a squeaking of brakes. Rushing ahead, the pursuers halted and watched the wagon zigzagging cautiously down an old, rutted hillside trail. At the foot of the slope it veered again, proceeded a short distance and then, after a bit of maneuvering, backed squarely against the side of the hill.

In the glare of a small lamp two men climbed down from the wagon. One advanced a few steps up the slope, tugged for a moment at a pile of brush, and revealed the black mouth of what was evidently an abandoned coal mine; the other removed a tarpaulin which had covered the entire rear of the wagon, and began lifting out objects of various sizes and shapes. Both had sixguns strapped to their belts.

For a long time the three punchers huddled there on the knoll and watched the men below carry their cargo into the cave. Suddenly Two-Spot tugged at the arm of his nearest companion.

"Mebbe I'm plumb loco," he whispered excitedly, "but watchin' this proceedin' gives a large-sized hunch that them jaspers down there ain't exactly law-abidin' citizens. Mebbe they're just plain, ord'nary bootleggers, an' again mebbe they're the ornery polecats that have caused us all our trouble. Anyway I'm ridin' a hunch, an' cravin' action. Grab a rock apiece, you two bucks, an' be ready to heave 'em an' hunt cover if they start slingin' lead. Here goes!"

Before either Slim or Tiff could offer a protest or a reply, Two-Spot sprang forward and crouched at the extreme edge of the knoll.

"All right!" he barked out authoritatively. "Stick 'em up—you! Up!"

Taken completely unawares, too astounded to do anything else, both men wheeled about and obeyed with surprising alacrity. Two-Spot, still in the darkness above them, uttered a sharp command to his companions.

"Go on down, boys, an' remove their artillery an' tie 'em up. I'll keep 'em covered an' the first gent that wiggles is a dead hombre."

At a quarter to six in the evening of the most momentous Sabbath in the history of Clarksville, the town's doughty marshal, Tom Hankins, resplendent in Sunday raiment with his nickeled badge of office glittering conspicuously upon his coat lapel, rapped timidly upon the door of a second floor room in the American House.

"Come in!" boomed a voice; and Hankins pushed the door forward cautiously.

"Well, well, if it ain't our old sparrin' partner, the sheriff!" Two-Spot fingernailed a match into flame and applied it to a fresh smoke. "Draw up a rocker an' set awhile, sheriff," he invited genially between puffs. "Tell us the news. I reckon a lot of water has run under the bridge since we hit the hay this mornin'."

"I'll say there has," the marshal replied eagerly. "Why, there was four wagon loads of stuff out in that cave; all the stuff from the Crescent Livery, some groceries they stole last night over at Clover Point, an' dry goods an' shoes an' other swag from all over the county. Them fellas has just natcherally been workin' at the wholesale burglary business, an' the skinny one's a fugitive from the State penitentiary. Been out since last June, an' there's a standin' reward of five hundred dol—"

"Yip! Yipee! Yeow!" Sim flung a spurred boot at the chandelier and raised a suffocating cloud of dust from the faded carpet with a wild, one-footed dance around the room.

Tiff wheeled about from the spotted washstand and stared unbelievingly at the

excited narrator and Two-Spot grinned.

A cold glitter appeared suddenly in the diminutive puncher's gray eyes.

"What sort of a yarn have you been passin' out to the folks about th' capture?" he asked sternly.

Hankins squirmed. "Nothin'—nothin' at all, so help me," he declared fervently. "I been workin' most all day bringin' in the swag, an' I ain't told nobody nothin' exceptin' that you fellas was mostly responsible for catchin' 'em."

Beads of perspiration appeared upon the worried marshal's forehead.

He groaned. "If the town ever finds out about that I'll—"

Two-Spot abruptly changed the subject.

"Now that we've come into wealth and plenty, we can eat with a clear conscience. S'pose we amble along down to the grub wagon. You're invited, sheriff."

Hankins scrambled to his feet.

"That's what I come up to tell you!" he exclaimed. "The mayor an' some of the leadin' men of the town are all downstairs right now—waitin' for you. They've sort of planned on lettin' bygones be bygones an' givin' you boys a little feed to show the town's appreciation."

"Now that's plumb nice and generous of th' home folks," said Two-Spot, "an' we are certainly agreeable."

At the head of the stairs the unhappy marshal hung back and clutched convulsively at Two-Spot. "You—you boys won't be too hard on me, will you?" he begged. "I'm an old man, an'—"

The diminutive cowboy grinned slyly.

"Can't make no rash promises," he declared with a shake of the head.

An hour later Two-Spot, his spirit eloquently aglow with that benevolent warmth which accompanies a well-filled stomach, made a speech.

First he complimented the community upon their possessing so efficient a guardian and preserver of the peace as the present incumbent, the grizzled Mr. Hankins. Then, grave-faced and in his own inimitable language of the range, Two-Spot wove an amazing story of the capture of the bandits—amazing not alone in its narrative originality but in the fact that it made the Clarksville marshal the real hero of the affair, with the three punchers as mere assistants.

"An' that's about all there is to it, gents," he concluded dramatically, "exceptin' that Mr. Hankins here, bein' of a generous as well as modest nature, and appreciatin' our—ahem—sorta embarrassed financial condition, has insisted on us all sharin' the reward."

Two-Spot bowed gracefully and sat down amid thunderous applause.

"Speech, Hankins, speech!" came the cry. It swelled to a unanimous clamor.

Willing hands pulled and pushed the befuddled hero to his feet.

"Er—gents and fella citizens," he began in a quivering falsetto, "I—I ain't no hand at speech makin'.

"I will say, though"—his voice grew firmer and he unconsciously protruded his chest—"that I never did figger these boys here guilty of the rob'ry. I just took 'em into custody yestiday mornin' so as to make the real culprits, the fellas I was watchin', think I wasn't after 'em.

"I—er—in conclusion I want to say that I allers puts my heart an' soul in my work, an' I'm obliged to all of you for your appreciation an' applause."

"Sufferin' snake-bites!" gasped Tiff, in the din which followed.

Speechless then for once, with his lower jaw dangling, Sim stared across the table at the doughty, elderly figure.

Two-Spot, the least perturbed of the trio, leaned close to Sim's ear so he could make himself heard.

"That ol' shorthorn is a better liar than I am," he declared admiringly.

ONE-NOTCH GUN

"THE MAN FROM LAZY RIVER" by Christopher B. Booth is our feature for the September issue. This is the story of Bob Caterson who, because of the changes which progress bring, drifted into the still-rugged rangeland country looking for forty-and-found.

When cowpuncher Bob Caterson hit the town of Vinegar Bend he heard depressing talk that no one could afford to hire hands, but Bob knew he was one of the best and he had faith in his own ability—and insurance for the future in the note written by his former boss. It read:

"To Whom It May Concern:

This is Bob Caterson, the best straw boss I ever had. He's there with the goods. There's just one thing he likes better than work, and that's trouble. Hire him quick."

Bob hadn't been in Vinegar Bend more than a few hours before he found himself a target in a sixgun duel with the town-killer who had been persuaded by forty pieces of gold to wipe out the newcomer. But Bob, who was as fast as greased lightning, out-drew the victim of a deadly frame-up. The breathless spectators immediately realized that this stranger was no common drifter.

From the hotel porch Nate Parsons, one of the wealthiest ranch-owners in the vicinity, called out to Bob:

"That was the coolest piece of work I ever seen—standin' there, rollin' that cigarette and gettin' Hess so nervous he had to pull first. That's some trick—makin' the other fella tech his gun and then drillin' him center."

"Yes," Bob admitted, casually.

"Come on over here to the hotel porch. I'm aiming to put up a little proposition to you," said the owner of Bar-X. "A little while ago you braced me for a job, and I turned you down—but that was 'fore I seen you unlimber the hardware.

"Son," he continued, "we're bein' afflicted with a plumb aggravatin' epidemic of cattle stealin'—an' it's been goin' on for 'most six months now without none of us bein' able to so much as lift a hand to stop it."

"So I understood," said Bob, having some intimation of what was coming. "Your proposition is?"

"My proposition is that I put your name on the Bar-X payroll; to all intents an' purposes you'll be ridin' range for me, your particular duties bein' roundin' up strays. For them services I'll give you regular wages. In addition to that, however, I'll pass you thirty a month on the side, for you'll more'n likely be runnin' some risk. I want you to get the goods on them rustlers, somethin' that not a man of us has been able to do. And of course, there's that five-hundred dollar reward that's bein' offered—an' that'll be yours if you can solve the mystery and round-up the rustlers. I think you're the man to do it!"

"I'll take the job," responded Bob promptly.

And with this, cowpuncher Bob Caterson rode into a bee-hive of undercover activities and traveled the rustlers' trail, dotted with rifle-toting bushwhackers and professional brand-blotters whose subtle methods baffled all the ranchers in the vicinity.

This exciting tale is designed for your reading pleasure and will appear in its entirety in our next issue.

The Editor

The whiplash brought him swiftly to his feet.

MAX BRAND'S

★ Stirring Novelette ★

OUTCAST BREED

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Half-breed John Cameron was damned for life—unless he could prove his mettle in a dead man's trap.

CHAPTER ONE

Out for Blood!

CAMERON saw the ears of the rabbit above the rock when he was a hundred yards away. He began to stalk with the care he might have used to get at a deer; meat in even small portions was so valuable to him and Mark Wayland. As long as the rifle ammunition held out they had fared well, but it was as hard to get within revolver-shot of desert game as it is to surprise a hawk.

Through the dusty film of twilight Cameron took aim and fired, not exactly at the ears but at the imagined head beneath them, hoping to break off the edge of the rock with the weight of his bullet. But the rock shed the speeding lead as it might have slanted a drop of water. Not one rabbit appeared, but three of them exploded from the shelter, and each ran in a different direction.

Cameron stood up as tall as his toes would lift him. The olive darkness of his face and the brown of his eyes lighted; he

smiled a little. And then the revolver spoke to north, west, south, rapidly, the nose of it jerking at each explosion. The first two rabbits skidded along the earth, dead. The one to the south leaped high into the air and then his fifth shot accurately smashed the backbone of the jack-rabbit from end to end.

Before Cameron moved again, halted as he was in mid-stride, he rapidly reloaded the Colt. It seemed a single uninterrupted gesture that jammed the five cartridges into the chambers. With the cylinder filled again, Cameron picked up the game, cleaned it, tied it into a bundle for the return trip, and then stood straight once more to scan the horizon. A fox or a wolf will do this after the flurry of the fight, when there is dead game to be eaten—a last look towards all possible danger before the feeding begins; and never a wolf had eyes brighter than those of Cameron.

It was during this rapid scanning of the whole circle of the twilight that he saw the glimmer on the head of the mountain, up there where stood his and Wayland's mine. That trembling gleam could be but one thing—the shimmer of flame!

The shack was on fire. In some way—it was inconceivable—Mark Wayland had permitted the cabin to become ignited. Once the fire caught on the wood there was nothing to do but shovel earth at the flames, for there was no water available. If the fire spread into the shaft and burned the timbers, the shaft would collapse; the labor of the many months would be undone, just as they were sinking into the valuable heart of the vein; just as they were writing the preface to a wealthy life, an easy future.

Cameron, through the space needed for one long breath, thought of these things. Then he stripped the ragged shirt from his back, wrapped the precious meat in it, and slinging the shirt around his shoulders like a knapsack he began to run.

He ran with his eye on the flame-spotted head of the mountain; as for the roughness of the terrain, his feet could see their own way. The half-Indian blood of his mother gave him that talent. Like an Indian, he toed in slightly, his body erect in spite of the weight on his back, his breathing deep and easy, an effortless spring in his stride.

When he came to the end of the valley, he started up the ascent of the trail-less slope with a shortened step. The small weight of the rabbit meat was beginning to tell on him, now. The burning of his lungs, the trembling exhaustion of effort, the agony of labor was stamped in the heaving of his lungs and in his shuddering muscles; but it appeared only as a slight shadow on his face in the sweat that polished the bronze of his body.

So he came to the upper level, the head of the elevation where he and Mark Wayland had found the thin streak of color, long ago, and had begun their mine.

He had brighter light than that of the dusk, now. It came from the ruins of the cabin, weltering with flame. And out of the throat of the mine shaft issued a boiling mist of flame and smoke.

The cabin was gone. The labor on the shaft was ruined also. But all of this could be redone. They had the plunder which three weeks of work in the heart of the vein had put into their hands—fifty pounds of gold-dust, and perhaps it would be wiser anyway to take the money to town, turn part of it into hired labor, tools, powder, mules, and return to reopen the work with ten-fold more advantage.

He thought of that as he stood on the edge of the little plateau and saw the flames. The fire made little difference. But where was the figure that he had imagined hard at work shoveling earth? Where was Mark Wayland? Where was that big, stocky body, that resolute face?

"Mark!" he shouted. "Mark! Oh, Mark!"

He had no answer. A dreadful surmise

rushed into Cameron's mind, a sort of darkness, a storm across the soul.

He ran forward past the mouth of the mine, past the crumbling, flame-eaten timbers of the hoist, towards the fiery shambles of the cabin. Smouldering, charred logs lay here and there where they had rolled from the shack.

Then off to one side he saw Mark Wayland! Strong wires had been twisted around his arms, fastening them helplessly to the sides. His legs had been wired together at the knees and also at the ankles. There was a gag crammed into the mouth.

SOMEONE had come, caught Mark Wayland by surprise, robbed the cabin, bound the victim, and trusted to the fire to rub out the record of the crime. And then Cameron saw that the eyes of the dead man were living.

A cry came from Cameron like the scream of a bird. He snatched the gag from the mouth of Wayland. He picked up the great, hulk of the body in his arms to carry it to the life-giving waters of the creek.

The voice of Wayland stopped him. The voice was calm. "I'm as good as dead," said he. "He shot him and left me here. Don't waste—motions. Listen to me!"

Cameron laid his burden back on the ground. He broke the wires that bound the captive.

"A gray mustang," gasped Wayland. "He was riding a gray mustang with a lopped ear—lopped left ear. A big—man . . . with a Roman nose and a lopped left ear—" And then Wayland died.

It meant that the years were struck away from Wayland. It meant that the years he had spent in rearing and caring for the outcast Cameron could never be repaid, nor that patience in teaching which had endowed Cameron with far more than his preceptor had ever known.

The whole future was snatched away from Cameron; the whole chance of making a return to his benefactor. And all the love that he had poured out towards Wayland would now have no object. It would blow away in the wind; it would be wasted on a ghost.

Cameron lay still on the ground; alone in his grief.

But there was one thing to live for. There was the man— the big sort of man, who rode the gray mustang with a lopped left ear. Cameron got up from the earth as a cat rises from sleep at the scent of prey.

The trail could not be followed by night. Cameron spent the darkness in digging the grave. He wanted some sort of ceremony. Instead, he could only give his own voice. And his own voice was too small for the moment. It could not fill the vast space of the mountains and the desert which the dawn was beginning to reveal; therefore, as he kneeled by the grave, Cameron merely lifted to the morning in the east his empty hands and made a silent vow.

Afterwards, he took the revolver and went on the trail.

There were only five bullets in that revolver, now. But he had enough rabbit's meat to last him for a time.

He followed the trail across the desert. It took him three days to get to the hills and to the town of Gallop. There the sign disappeared. But if he ever found the trail of that horse again he would know it. He would know it by the length of the stride in walking, trotting, galloping. He would know it by the size of the hoof-prints.

The only description he had of the rider was of a "Big sort of man," and Gallop was filled with "big sort of men." Therefore, he left the town and cut for sign in circles around it. Every day he made the circuit until at last, on the old desert trail, he found what he was looking for. He

had not been able to spot the gray horse in Gallop, but he had found the trail of it leading out of town.

FOR two days he ran down that trail; the rider traveled fast. For two days, he struggled along the traces of the unknown; at the end of the second day, he saw a winking fire in a patch of mesquite beside an alkali waterhole. He crawled to that fire on his belly, and saw standing nearby, eating from a nosebag, a gray mustang with a Roman nose—a dirty-gray mustang with a yellow stain in the unspotted portion of its hide. And its left ear was lopped off an inch from the point.

By the fire sat a big man with a broad, red face, and red hair. When Cameron looked at him, he smiled, and took a deep breath. The weariness of the two days of running slipped from his body. The tremor of exhaustion passed away from his nerves. His hands became quiet and sure.

Then he stood up on the edge of the firelight. "Put up your hands," said Cameron.

The red-faced man looked up with a laugh. "You won't get anything off of me except a hoss and a half a side of bacon, brother," he said. "What's the matter?"

"Stand up!" commanded Cameron.

The red-faced man grunted. "Aw—well—" he said. And he rose to his feet.

"You've got a gun on your hip," said Cameron. "Use it!"

"What's the matter?" shouted the other. "You ain't gonna murder me, are you?"

Fear rounded his eyes. A horror surged up in Cameron when he thought that this was the man who had killed Mark Wayland.

"Look!" said Cameron. "I'll give you a fair chance. I'm putting my gun up and we'll take an even start—"

This chivalry was not wasted. The man snatched his own weapon out, suddenly, and started fanning it at Cameron with the flick of a very expert thumb. He should have crashed at least one bullet through the brain of Cameron except that instinct was as keen as a wolf in him always. It told his feet what to do and as he side-stepped he whipped out his own gun.

If he could kill three scattering rabbits on the run he could kill one red-faced swine that was standing still. Cameron drove a bullet for the middle of the breast. It clanged on metal instead of thudding like a fist against flesh. The revolver, jerked out of the fat fingers, was hurled back into the red face. The big fellow made two or three running steps backwards, gripped at the stars with both hands and fell on his back.

Cameron picked up the fallen gun. It was whole.

"Here!" he commanded. "Take up that gun and we'll start again."

The other pushed himself up on his hands. There was a bump rising on his forehead but otherwise he had not been hurt. "Who are you?"

"My name is Cameron. Stand up!"

"I ain't gonna stand up. Cameron, I never done you any harm. Why are you after me?"

"You've done me more harm than any other man can ever do!" exclaimed Cameron. He came a little closer, drawn by his anger. Hatred pulled the skin of his face taut. "When you did your murder—when you bound him and left him in the cabin—you didn't know that he'd manage to wriggle out of the fire and live long enough to put me on your trail. But—"

"Bound him—burning cabin—what are you talking about, Cameron? I never killed a man in my life."

"What's your name?"

"Jess Cary."

"Cary, tell me where you got the gray horse?"

"From Terry Wilson, back there in

Gallop. He sold me the old gray mustang."

"What sort of looking man is Wilson?"

"Big sort of feller."

Surety that he was hearing the truth struck home in the brain of Cameron like the bell-clapper against bronze. He began to tremble. It was as though Fate had indeed turned the bullet from the heart of Jess Cary; and only for that reason were the hands of Cameron clean.

Back there in the town of Gallop—a big fellow by the name of Terry Wilson—a man who had been anxious to sell the gray horse—that was the murderer of Mark Wayland.

Cameron backed off into the darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

Killer's Track

HE HAD a last picture of Jess Cary glowering hopelessly after him from the small, ragged circle of firelight. Then he turned and struck back through the night.

There was big Terry Wilson to be reached, but Terry Wilson was a known man in Gallop, he discovered, and men whose names are known are easily found. Terry Wilson would have to die; and then some peace would come to the tormented ghost of Mark Wayland.

This thought soothed the soul of the hunter. During the last two days he had made great exertions following the trail of Jess Cary. So when he reached a run of water in the hills at the edge of the desert, he stopped the swinging dogtrot with which he covered ground and lay down to rest. Infinite fatigue made the earth a soft bed. As for the hunger which consumed him, a notch taken up in his belt quieted that appetite. In a moment he was sound asleep.

He had five hours of rest by dawn. Fatigue still clouded his brain, so he stripped, swam in a pool of the stream. After that, he dressed and ran on towards Gallop, with the same effortless pace which always drifted him over the trail. A jack-rabbit rose from nothingness and dissolved itself with speed. He tipped it over with a snap shot and ate half-roasted meat, sitting on his heels at a hot, smokeless fire of dry twigs. Afterwards he lay flat for twenty minutes, sleeping; and then rose to run as lightly as ever towards Gallop.

That night he slept three hours, ran on again, and entered Gallop in the early morning when life was beginning to stir. He had two bullets left in his gun, but two bullets would be enough.

The blacksmith had the doors of his shop open and was starting a fire in his forge. "Terry Wilson—can you tell me where I can find him?" asked Cameron.

The blacksmith looked up from the gloom of the shop.

"Terry Wilson. Sure. He's got the corral at the end of the town. He's the horse-dealer."

The horse-dealer! The lightness went out of the step of Cameron, as he turned away. He had thought that vengeance was about to fill his hand. Instead, it was probable that Wilson was only another milestone pointing down the trail of the manhunt.

He reached the corrals of the horse-dealer in time to see a new herd driven through the gates of the largest enclosure. They washed around the lofty fences like water around the lip of a bowl. Dust rose in columns, a signal smoke against the sky. Dust spilled outwards in billows, and in that mist Cameron found a big fellow who was pointed out to him.

"Mr. Wilson," he said, "you sold a lop-eared gray to Jess Cary, didn't you?"

The man turned his eye from the contemplation of the horses.

"Jess stick you with that no-account mustang?" he asked.

"Where did you buy the gray?"

"Tierney," answered Terry Wilson. "Will Tierney." His eye changed as he stared at Cameron. "Ain't you Mark Wayland's breed?" he demanded.

The question stiffened the spine of Cameron to ice. Something broke in his brain and a mist of red clouded his eyes. He had to force himself to turn on his heel, slowly, and walk away.

It was not the first time he had heard the word. Breed, usually, or half-breed in full, slurring from life of men with no friendliness for any part of Cameron's heritage. Was it always to strike at him like poison in his shadow? And why? He could wish that he had not led such a secluded life with Mark Wayland, riding, shooting, working as hard as any man, and then, in the evening, stretching out beside the campfire with one of Wayland's books.

He knew something of grammar and books; he knew the wilderness; but he knew nothing of men. Of the human world he had had only a few glimpses as he passed through with Mark Wayland. And now it seemed that the strange insult of the word breed was to be cast in his face from every side.

But why?

His mother's mother had been a beauty of the Blackfoot tribe, a queen of her kind. Was there not honor in such blood? And a chieftain of the frontier had married her. Was not their daughter able to hold up her head even before thrones?

Three parts of his blood were white, and as for the other part, he could see in it nothing but glory. Yet the world called him breed as it might have called him cur!

Will Tierney was asleep at the hotel. "I'll go up and wake him now," said Cameron.

"The hell you will!" answered the hotel clerk. He'll take your skin off if you wake him up before noon. Tierney ain't a gent to fool with. I guess you know that."

Cameron left the lobby. He could wait till noon, easily enough. Behind him his acute ear caught the phrase: "That's a breed, ain't it?"

"Yeah. Walks like one."

Why? What was the matter with his walk? Had Mark Wayland kept him purposely in the wilderness during those long prospecting trips so that his skin would be tough before he was exposed to the tongue of the world?

He found a tree in the little plaza opposite the hotel and sat on his heels to smoke a cigarette and think. Sun was filling the world. Over the roof of the hotel he could look up the gorge of Champion Creek and see the white dazzle of the cliffs on its western side. There was beauty and peace to be found; but where men moved in numbers there was insult, cruelty—

THE morning wore away. The sun climbed. The heat increased. A magnificent fellow came down the steps of the hotel and strode along the street. There was a flash and glory about him. He had that distinction of face which is recognized even at a distance. He bore himself with the pride of a champion. And if his blue silk shirt and silver conchos down his trousers and glint of Mexican wheelwork around his sombrero made a rather gaudy effect, it would be forgiven as the sheen of a real splendor of nature.

So that was Will Tierney! Cameron could have wished the name on a fellow of a different aspect, but nevertheless he would have to accost the handsome swaggering giant. He was up and after him instantly, and followed him through the swing-doors of Grady's saloon on the corner. A dozen men were inside breathing the cool of the place, and the aroma of beer and the sour of whisky.

"Step up, boys!" Tierney was saying. "Line up! it's on me!"

A trampling of feet brought everyone towards the bar as Cameron stepped to

the shoulder of Tierney and said: "Mister Tierney, you sold a lop-eared gray mustang to Terry Wilson. Do you mind telling me where you got the horse?"

Tierney turned with a sudden jerk. His upper lip pulled back in a sneer that showed the white of his teeth. His eyes were the black of a night that is polished by the stars. He gave Cameron one glance and then nodded to the bartender.

"Grady," he said, "since when have you been letting breeds drink in your place?"

The bartender grunted as though he had been kicked in the stomach. "Is that a breed? Get out, you!"

A bow-legged cowpuncher with a bulldog face and neck, shook a fist under the chin of Cameron.

"That means you! Get!" he growled.

Tierney stood back against the bar with one hand on his hip, the other dangling close to the butt of a revolver that was strapped to his thigh. He was laughing.

"You—Tierney—it's you that I want to talk to!" exclaimed Cameron. "Where did you get that gray horse? Will you answer me that? It's a fair question."

"Grady," said Tierney, "do I have to talk to such strangers as you let in your place?"

The cowpuncher with the face of a bulldog drove a big fist straight at the head of Cameron. His punch smote thin air as Cameron dodged—right into the sway of another powerful blow. There were a dozen enemies, all bearing down. He tried to shift through them. Hands caught at him. His gun was snatched away. A swinging Colt clipped the side of his head and half-stunned him.

Then he was through the swinging doors. The sunlight along the street was like a river of white fire that flowed into his bewildered brain. Hands thrust him forward. He was kicked brutally from behind and pitched on face and hands into the burning dust of the street.

"Where's a whip?" called the clear, ringing voice of Tierney. "We'll put a quirt on him!"

A whiplash cut across the back of Cameron and brought him swiftly to his feet in time to take another lash across his shoulder and breast. Then a rider plunged between him and the Grady crowd.

The horse was skidded to a halt; a girl's voice shouted: "What a crew of cowards you are! A dozen of you on one man! A dozen of you! Will Tierney, isn't there any shame in you? Jack—Tom Culbert—Harry—I'll remember that you were all in this!"

They scattered before her words as before bullets. Two or three hurried down the street; the rest streamed back through the swing-doors of Grady's saloon.

He had dragged off his ragged hat and looked into the gray eyes and the brown, serious face of the girl. She wore a blouse of faded khaki, a well-battered divided riding skirt of the same stuff. But every inch of the horse she rode spoke of money. That was not what mattered. The thing she had done talked big in the mind of Cameron. And it seemed to him that he could look into the beauty of her face as far and as deep as into the loveliness of a summer evening in the mountains.

"It was rotten of them!" the girl flared. "I don't care what you were doing—it's rotten for a dozen to pick on one man."

He put his hand over his shoulder and tentatively felt the welt which the whiplash had left. It was still burning and growing. He could feel it easily through his shirt.

"I was asking a question of one of them; and they didn't want me in there. So—" He made a quick gesture. "So they threw me out!" he said, and in trying to cover his expression of rage, he smiled.

"Ah?" said the girl. "The drunken hoodlums! I'm Jacqueline Peyton. Who are you?"

"John Cameron," said he.

"Cameron's a good name. I like it," she said. "I like you, too. I like the look of you, John Cameron. Are you down and out?"

"I've been down just now," he answered. He turned his head and looked steadfastly at the door of the saloon. "I'll be up again, though, perhaps."

"You want to go back in there and fight them? Don't be crazy!" she commanded. "You come along with me. Dad needs a new man or two, and he'll give you a job."

She dismounted. She touched his arm and his eyes drew down from the picture of the vengeance which had been growing across his mind.

"Yes—I'll go a ways with you," he said. "You get on the horse again."

"I don't ride when a friend is walking," she answered. "Come along, John Cameron."

He walked beside her down the middle of the street.

SHE was not very tall. Her forehead would touch his chin, just about. That, it appeared, was the right height. She was not heavy and she was not light, except in the quick grace of her movements. She had a voice that he must have heard before. He said that aloud: "Have I heard you speak before to-day?"

"I don't know. I'm pretty noisy. I do a lot of talking," she smiled. "Have you been around this town?"

"No," he answered. "But it seems as though I've heard your voice before. The sound of it strikes in a certain place and makes echoes. It makes me happy."

She slowed her step and looked up at him with a frown. "Are you saying that just for my benefit, because you think it sounds nicely?" she demanded.

"Are you angry?" asked Cameron. "I'm sorry."

"No, I guess you mean it, all right," she decided aloud. "But just for a minute I wondered—well—let it go! What are you doing in town, John Cameron?"

"I'm looking for a man—and I think I've found him," said he.

"Is that good news or bad news for him?" said the girl.

"I have to kill him," said Cameron slowly.

She looked suddenly up at him again. "Shouldn't I have said that?" he asked her.

"Great Scott, John!" she answered, "do you mean that you're out on a blood-trail—you—at your age—"

"I'm twenty-two," said he.

"And going to kill a man? Why, John?"

"Because he murdered my friend," said Cameron.

"Murdered? But there's the law. You can't—"

He lifted his hands and looked down at them curiously.

"If the law hanged him, there would be nothing left for me," said Cameron gently.

"Good heavens!" said the girl. "You do mean it."

"You're angry," said Cameron. "And that makes me unhappy."

"Not angry. But horrified. Really on a blood-trail! Are you sure that your friend was murdered?"

"He was bound and left in a burning cabin," said Cameron. "And I came back before he was dead."

They were beyond the edge of the town. The girl halted, looking straight up into the eyes of Cameron, but he was staring past her at the vision from the past.

"He lived long enough to tell me what sort of horse the murderer rode. He told me that before he died."

"No!" cried the girl.

"He was burned badly," said Cameron.

The girl, making an odd bubbling noise in the back of her throat, had slumped suddenly against the shoulder of the horse.

CHAPTER THREE

Courageous Decision

HE COULD not tell what to do, but the sight of her helplessness made him feel strangely helpless, also. He touched her with his hands and his eyes, reverently; and this reverence seemed to restore her strength. She was able to stand straight again. The mare turned her head inquisitively towards the mistress and was pushed away by a touch that was also a caress. The path for the girl's mind had to be cleared of everything else so that she could stare at the problem of Cameron.

"I never heard of anything so terrible. It makes me want to help you. How can I help you, John?"

"By letting me come to you whenever you're in trouble — whenever you need any sort of help. By letting me walk up the road with you."

"Walk up the road?" she repeated, bewildered.

"This is the happiest thing I've ever done," he answered. "Walking up this road with you, I mean."

At this, her eyes avoided him and her color grew warmer. "That was a wrong thing to say. I've hurt you by saying that," he declared.

"No," she said. "It's not the wrong thing to say. John, I don't think you could say the wrong thing."

He felt his face growing hot. He swallowed, and said after a moment of silence: "I haven't seen very much of people, and I don't know how to talk." He walked on beside her. "But is this a happiness for you, too?"

"Yes."

"As though when the road climbed the hill, we'd find something wonderful on the other side of it?"

She laughed. "A sort of road through the sky?" she said.

"Exactly that! How did you happen to think of that? How did you know what I was thinking?"

"I don't know. It's very strange," she said.

She began to laugh and he laughed with her and their voices made together a music of two parts, high and deep, but with only one theme. He was aware of that. It delighted him and it delighted her, also. Their laughter stopped, and they looked at one another with shining eyes.

But still they were walking on, and at this moment they passed the top of the hill beyond which, he had said, they might find that the road was laid through the sky.

What they saw was a string of a dozen or more Indians riding across the main trail, blanketed Indians who only lacked feathers in their hair to give them the exact look of the old days. They crossed into the trees and were gone.

"I knew we'd see something strange," said the girl. "They're heading up towards the new reservation."

Something had stirred in the heart of Cameron, and he looked earnestly after the vanished file of riders. But now a turn of the trail brought them to the Peyton ranch, suddenly, the confusion of the big corrals, a grove of cotonwoods and the low, broad forehead of the house itself showing over the rim of the rise.

Her father would be inside the house, she said. She gave her mare to a boy who loitered near the hitching rack and took Cameron straight into the house. He hung back.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"My clothes are ragged. They're dusty and dirty."

"Your skin is clean, and so are your eyes. That's what counts. You come along in and don't be afraid of anything. Father needs a man like you on the place."

THE living room was a big, barnlike place where a dance or a meeting could have been held. Over in a corner, in a leather chair, sprawled a man with gray hair and a grayish care-worn face. He looked up from some paper spread out before him and rumbled: "Well, Jack, what have you brought home?"

"John Cameron," said the girl. "And he's a lot to bring. He wants a job and you'll give him a place. You need him."

Peyton smiled a little. "You know how these doggone girls are, don't you?" he asked. "The newest dress and the newest man are the only things that count!"

Cameron did not smile. He was too seriously and deeply examining the fatherly kindness of that face.

"I want men who can ride and shoot," said Peyton. "We have some rough horses and some pretty handy gents in long loops have been helping themselves to the herds. They got one of our own men last week. Can you ride and shoot?"

Cameron laughed. With Mark Wayland, he never had had horseflesh to ride unless it were wild-caught, fiercely savage, vengeful, cruel. "Yes, I can ride," he said. "I can shoot pretty well, too."

"Good with a rope?"

"I never had one in my hands," said Cameron. "But I can learn."

"Yeah," growled Peyton. "Boys can learn how to handle a rope. But they're born or not to shoot fast and straight. Let me see how good you can shoot. Here—come over to this window—got a gun on you?"

"No."

"Take this. Look yonder—you see that crow on top of that fence? Knock him off of it."

"It's not fair, dad!" exclaimed the girl.

"Sure it ain't fair," said Peyton. "But there's nothing any closer for him to blaze away at."

He passed his gun to Cameron, and they saw him stand a little straighter, with his head raised in a peculiar pride and eagerness. Many unfortunate men were to learn the meaning of that lifting of the head before the end of his trail.

He gave to the target a single glance. His hand swept up, bearing the flash of the gun. The nose of it jerked as the weapon exploded. The crow leaped from the fence post and swung into the air.

"Missed!" said Peyton.

"Try again!" cried the girl. "It was a close one."

"It will fall," said Cameron, calmly. "It is dying on the wing."

Peyton shrugged. "What makes you think you hit it? No feathers flew."

"I always know when the bullet strikes," said Cameron.

"What tells you?" scowled Peyton.

"I can't say. But I know."

Peyton glared at the girl and she shrugged her shoulders as she answered the glance. This sort of calm egotism was not to her taste any more than it was to the taste of her father. But now Peyton exclaimed: "By thunder! Look!"

The crow, flapping hard, circling for height, seemed to fall suddenly from the edge of his invisible tower in the sky. Down he came, blown into a ragged bundle of feathers by the wind, and struck the ground with a thump that was audible to the three watchers. Cameron gave the gun back to Peyton.

"How did you know you'd slugged that bird?" demanded Peyton, almost angrily.

"Well—I feel which way the bullet goes," said Cameron. "I've hunted a good deal when every bullet had to be turned into a dead rabbit, or a deer. You learn to feel just where the bullet is going."

He made this speech with such a simplicity that all at once Peyton began to smile. "All right, Cameron," he said. "I want you on this place. You're hired."

Hoofbeats swept up to the front of the house, paused. And almost at once there

trampled into the room three big men. One of them was Will Tierney.

"There's a dance at Ripton," called out Tierney. "Going with me, Jack?"

Then his voice changed as he barked out: "What's the idea, bringing breeds home, Jack?"

"What do you mean?" asked the girl. She cried it out and made a quick-step away from Cameron.

"Breed?" growled her father. "Are you a breed, Cameron?"

Big Tierney and the other two men were striding closer. "Throw him out!" said Tierney. "Think of the gall of him, coming out here! Jack, what's the matter with you? Can't you see the smoke in the eye?"

CAMERON looked not at all at this approaching danger. He considered the girl only, and saw her eyes widen with horror and disgust. She caught up a hand to her breast as though she were struck to the heart by some memory. He knew what that memory was. It was their walk together up the road.

Hands fell on him. But they could do nothing to him compared with the look in the great, stricken eyes of the girl as she turned away from him.

Then Cameron turned towards the others. The two tall, fair-haired men had something of the look of Jacqueline about them. They were her brothers, perhaps.

"Kick him out!" shouted one of them.

"I'll leave the place and never come back," said Cameron. "But if you handle me, I'll return and kill you, one by one, I swear!"

"D'you hear him?" cried Tierney, and he struck Cameron across the mouth with the flat of his hand. They swept Cameron to the window and hurled him through it. He landed on his head and shoulders, rolled over, and came staggering to his feet.

"And if I have a look at you again," called Tierney, "I'll take a whip to you myself!"

In a wind-swept ravine among the hills the campfire blew aside, sharply slanting, fluttering the flames to blueness, making them shrink close to the sticks which were burning. The circle of blanketed figures around that fire was very dimly illuminated; young John Cameron, standing in the center of the circle, near the fire, could be seen more clearly. Instinct had made him select the leader of the party. He had to face the wind in order to look at the old man. He had to stiffen his lips and raise his voice against the blast. Sometimes he was almost shouting. And his breath was short as he came to the end.

"I have told you everything. The men kicked me out of their way like dirt. Therefore, I am not one of their people. If I am not a white man, then I am an Indian. Let me come with you."

There was a slight turning of heads as all looked towards the old man. He rose, tapped the ashes out of his pipe, and stepped close to Cameron. He was very old. The million wrinkles on his face were like knife-cuts, but the eyes, folded back behind drooping lids, were as bright as youth itself.

He laid on the breast of Cameron the tip of a forefinger as hard as naked bone.

"My son," he said, and the words blew with the wind and entered the mind of Cameron. "My son, when the heart is sick men turn to new places. But they find no happiness except among their own kind. What is your kind? The white people will not have you. But you have an eye too open and wide. You are not an Indian. We cannot take you. You would bring new ways to us. You are neither white nor Indian. You must live your own life in your own world. Or else you must fight the white men or the Indians until they take you in. All people are glad to have a man of whom they are afraid. Find the best man among many

and ask him. He will surely tell you what to do."

The wind was at the back of Cameron, helping him, and it was still early night when he came again into the long, winding main street of the town of Gallop. Fire still burned in the forge of the blacksmith; he was still hammering at his anvil when the voice at his door made him look up and see the same agile, light form that he had noticed that same morning.

"Will you name the best man in Gallop?" Cameron was asking.

"The best man?" The blacksmith laughed. "Les Harmody is the best man, all right."

"Where shall I find him?"

"He's in the old Tucker house, down the street. He moved in there the other day and unrolled his pack. Fourth house from the corner, in the middle of the big lot."

Cameron found the place, easily. His mind was weighted by the sense of a double duty. He had to find Will Tierney and make sure that Tierney was indeed the murderer of Wayland. When he killed Tierney, it must be not as a sneaking man-slayer.

Les Harmody might be the man to tell him what to do. He had heard the name before, but he could not tell how or where. Wayland himself must have spoken of Harmody. But the name had always been attached to something great. He was an old man, no doubt, and loaded with the wisdom of the years.

So Cameron tapped with a reverent hand at the door of the shack. A faint light seeped through the cracks in the flimsy wall.

"Come in!" thundered a great voice.

He pulled the door open and stepped inside. The wind slammed the door shut behind him because what he saw loosened the strength of his fingers. He never had seen such a man; he never had hoped to see one.

SOMEWHERE between youth and grayness, young enough to retain speed of hand and old enough to have his strength hardened upon him, Les Harmody filled the mind and the eye. He was not a giant in measured inches or in counted pounds, but he struck the imagination with a gigantic force He was magnificent rather than handsome. The shaggy forelock and the weight of the jaw gave a certain brutality to his face, but the enormous power that clothed his shoulders and his arms was the main thing. His wrist was as round and as hard as an apple, filled with compacted sinews of power and the iron bone of strength underneath.

He was eating a thick steak with a mug of coffee placed beside it. Gristle or bone in the last mouthful crackled between his teeth now.

"Are you Les Harmody?" asked Cameron.

The other nodded.

"I've come to ask you a question," said Cameron. He stepped closer to the table.

"You're Wayland's breed, ain't you?" asked the great voice.

Cameron stopped, stiffening suddenly.

"I don't talk to breeds. I don't have them in the same place with me. Get out!" commanded Harmody.

"I go without talking?" said Cameron. "Like a dog?"

"All breeds is dogs," said Harmody.

"Dogs have teeth," answered Cameron, and stepping still closer, he leaned and flicked his hand across the face of the giant.

Harmody rose without haste. His eye measured several things: Cameron, and the distance to the door which assured him that the victim could not escape. He leaned one great hand on the table and in the other raised the mug of coffee, which he emptied at a draught. He wiped his dripping lips on the back of his hand as he put down the cup.

"I've come to ask a question and I'll have your answer," said Cameron. "I'll have it—if I have to tear it out of your throat!"

Harmody did not walk around the table. He brushed it aside with a light gesture, and all the dishes on it made a clattering.

"You'll tear it out of me?" he said softly, and then he lunged for Cameron.

Up there in the mountain camps, patiently, with fists bare, Mark Wayland had taught his foster son something of the white man's art of self-defense. Cameron used the lessons now. He had no hope of winning; he only hoped that he might prove himself a man.

Speed of foot shifted him aside from the first rush. He hit Harmody three times on the side of the jaw as the big target rushed past. It was like hitting a great timber with sacking wrapped over it.

Harmody stopped his rush, turned. He pulled a gun and tossed it aside. "I'm gonna kill you," he said through his teeth, "but I don't want tools to do the job. Try to make a fool out of me, eh?"

He came again, not blindly, but head up, balanced, inside himself, as a man who understands boxing advances. Even if he had been totally ignorant, to stand to him would have been like standing to a grizzly. But he had skill to back up his power. He was fast, bewilderingly fast for a man of his poundage.

He feinted with a left. He repeated with the same hand, and the blow grazed the head of Cameron. It was as though the hoof of a brass-shod stallion had glanced from his skull. The weight of the blow flung him back against the wall and Harmody rushed in to grasp a helpless victim.

His arms reached for nothingness. Cameron had slid away with a ducking sidestep. He had to look on his own fists as tack hammers. They would only avail if they hit the right place a thousand times, breaking down some nerve center with repeated shocks.

The swift blows thudded on the jaw of Harmody, as he swayed around. He tried the left feint and repeat, again. The blow was side-stepped.

Wings were under the feet of Cameron, and he felt them and used them. If only there were more room than this shack afforded—if only he had space to maneuver in, then he could swoop and retreat and swoop again until he had beaten this monster into submission. But he had to keep a constant thought of the walls, the overturned chairs, the table which had crashed over on its side and extended its legs to trip him. And one slip, one fall, would be the end of him.

THOSE dreadful hands of Harmody would break him in an instant, but every moment he was growing more sure, more steady. He changed from the jaw and shot both hands for the wind. His right thumped on the ribs as on the huge round of a barrel; but the left dug deep into the rubbery stomach muscles, and Harmody grunted.

A second target, that made. And then he reached Harmody's glaring eyes with hooking punches that jarred back the massive head. He reached the wide mouth and puffed and cut the lips. They fought silently, except for the noise of their gasping breath.

And always there was the terrible danger that one of Harmody's blows would get fairly home. Then the devil that was lodged behind his eyes would have its chance at full expression.

A glancing blow laid open the cheek of Cameron. He felt the hot running of blood down his face.

But that was nothing. Nothing compared with the stake for which he fought. Not merely to endure for a time, but actually to win, to conquer, to beat this

great big hulk of a man into submission!

He fought for that. He never struck in vain. For the eyes, for the mouth, for the vulnerable side of the chin, or for the soft stomach—those were his targets.

A hammer-stroke brushed across his own mouth—merely brushed across it—but slashed the lips open and brought a fresh down-pouring of the blood. In return, he stepped aside and tattooed the body and then the jaw of Harmody.

The big fellow was no longer an exhaustless well of energy, but now he paused between rushes. His mouth opened wide to take greater breath. Sweat dripped down his face and mingled with the blood. But the flaming devil in his eyes was still bright.

Exhaustion began to work in Cameron, also. He had to run, to dance, to keep himself poised as on wings. And the preliminary tremors of weakness began to run through his body constantly. He saw that the thing would have to come to a crisis. He would have to bring it to an end—meet one of those headlong charges and literally knock the monster away from him! It was impossible—but it was the only way.

He saw the rush start, and he moved as though to leap to either side. Instead, he sprang in, ducked the driving fist that tried to catch him, and hammered a long overhand right straight against the jaw of Harmody.

The solid shock, his running weight and lashing blow against the rush of Harmody, turned his arm numb to the shoulder.

But Harmody was stopped. He was halted, he was put back on his heels, he was making little short steps to the rear, to regain his balance!

Cameron followed like a greedy wild cat. The right hand had no wits in it, now. He used the left, then, and with three full drives he found the chin of Harmody.

He saw the great knees buckle. The head and shoulders swayed. The guarding, massive arms dropped first, and then Les Harmody sank to the floor.

Cameron stepped back. He wanted to run in and crash his fist home behind the ear—a stroke that would end the fight even if Harmody were a giant. But there were rules in this game, and a fallen man must not be hit.

So Cameron stood back, groaning with eagerness, and saw the loosened hulk on its knees and on one supporting hand.

"Have you got enough?" gasped Cameron.

"Me?" groaned Les Harmody. "Me? Enough? Damn you—"

He lurched to his feet. Indignation seemed to burn the darkness out of his brain, and again he was coming in.

Once more, Cameron stepped in to check the rush. This time his fist flew high—his right shoulder was still aching from the first knockdown—and he felt the soggy impact against the enormous, blackened cushion which covered the spot where the eyes of Harmody should have been shining.

It was a hard blow, but it was not enough to stop Harmody. Before the eyes of Cameron loomed a great fist. He tried to jerk his head away from its path, but it jerked upward too swiftly. The shock seemed not under the jaw but at the back of his head. He fell forward on his face. . . .

Consciousness came back to him, after that, in lurid flashes. He had a vague knowledge that told him he would be killed, certainly. He was dead already. It was his ghost that was wakening in another world.

Then he was aware of lights around him, and the wide flash of a mirror's face. There were exclaiming voices. There was a greater voice than all others, the thunder of Les Harmody. A mighty hand upheld him, wavering. A powerful shoul-

der braced against him—helping him.

He looked now, and saw his own face, dripping crimson, swollen, purple here and running blood there. He saw the face of Les Harmody beside his own—and the big man's features had been battered out of shape.

THIS monster was shouting, out of a lop-sided mouth: "Here's the fellow that stood up to me—me—Les Harmody! I thought that the time would never come when I'd have the pleasure of standin' hand to hand with any one man. Look at him, you coyotes, you sneakin' house dogs that run and yammer like hell when a wolf comes to town! Look at him—here's plenty of wolf for you! Look at the skinny size of him that fought Les Harmody man to man, and knocked me down. And then, he stood back and give me my chance to stand once more! I tell you, look at him, will you!"

The big bandana of Harmody dipped into a schooner of beer. He drew it out, sopping, crushed the excess liquid out, and then carefully sponged the bleeding face of Cameron.

The cold and the sting of the beer helped to rouse him completely.

"Speak up, one of you—d'you see him?" thundered Harmody.

There was a murmur: "Grady, you fat-faced buzzard, d'you see him now? Is he a man?"

"He's anything that you want to call him, Les."

"The rat that ever calls him a breed again is gonna have me to reckon with afterwards. No, he don't need no help. He can go by himself. But he'll have fair play, man to man. Listen, kid—are you feelin' better? I wanted them to see you, and what you done to me. I wanted the whole damn world to see. Kid, will you drink with me? Can you stand, and can you drink? Whiskey, Grady. Damn you, move fast. Whiskey for the kid. Here, feller, I've been searching the world for a gent with the nerve and the hands to stand up to me. Here's to the man that done it. Every one of you hombres liquor up on this. Take a look at him. He's a man. He's a M-A-N! Drink to him. Bottoms up!"

CHAPTER FOUR

'Breed Law

THERE was music in the Peyton house. Joe Peyton thrummed a banjo; Harry and Will Tierney sang; Jacqueline was at the piano, and her father, Oliver Peyton, composed himself in a deep chair with his hands folded behind his head, a contented audience. They had not heard the pounding hoofs of a big horse approach the house, but they were aware of the creaking of the floor in the hall as someone walked toward them, and now the great figure that loomed in the doorway silenced the song in the middle. Oliver Peyton jumped to his feet.

"Hey, Les Harmody!" he called. "I'm glad to see you, old son. Come in and sit down. You know everybody. What you drinking?"

Harmody accepted the extended hand rather gingerly.

"Thanks, Ollie," he said. "I'm not drinking. And for what I've got to say I reckon that standing will be the best. Sorry to break in on you folks like this. Hello, Jacqueline. Hello, Will. Hello, everybody. Glad to see you—and sorry to see you, too."

"What's the matter, Les?" urged Oliver Peyton, frowning anxiously. "You talk as though you had a grudge, old-timer?"

"By a way of speaking I ain't got a grudge," said Harmody. "But in another way, I got a pretty deep one. I've come from a friend, and a better friend no man ever had. You know John Cameron?"

"The breed?" asked Tierney.

Harmody started. "That's the wrong word for him, Will. I've stood up and told people that 'breed' ain't the word for him. But maybe you weren't around when I did my talking. His grandmother was a Blackfoot girl that could of married a chief and done him proud. His father and all his line are as white as white. Understand?"

"Blood is blood," said Tierney, calmly. "He's always a breed, to me."

Harmody took in a big breath. "We'll find a better place to argue it out, one day," he said.

"Any place and any time would be good for me," said Tierney, and his bright eyes measured Harmody steadily.

"Quit it, Will!" commanded Oliver Peyton. "It only riles up Les. Can't you see that? Les, I wish you'd sit down!"

"I'll say it standing," answered Harmody. "I've been away in the hills for pretty near a month with Cameron. It takes time to learn to know a friend, but I've learned to know him. On a horse, or on his feet, with his hands or with a gun, I never found a better man. But he's got ideas."

He paused, when he said this, and ran his eyes over the group, his glance dwelling for a moment on the face of the girl. She had grown pale. "Jacqueline," said Harmody, "maybe you know what news I've got?"

"I can guess it," she answered.

Her father stared at her.

"I've done a lot of talking and reasoning with him," went on Harmody, "but the main thing is that he feels he's given his word. So he'll keep it! Right here in this room he gave his promise!"

"He did," said the girl through colorless lips.

"What promise?" asked Oliver Peyton.

"When Will and Joe and Harry had their hands on him, he told them that if they threw him out, he'd kill them."

"What kind of foolishness is this?" demanded Oliver Peyton. "I heard that, too—"

"Why, he's a crazy fool!" declared young Joe Peyton.

"Harmody," said Oliver Peyton, "you mean to say that that fellow—that man Cameron—that—he's going to come on the trail of my boys?"

"He gave 'em a fair warning," said Harmody. "There was three of them, and he gave them a fair warning not to handle him. And then they done it. I tell you, Ollie, a promise is a mighty sacred thing to that Cameron."

"There's a law," said the rancher, "and I'll have the sheriff and his men out!"

"Hell, Oliver," said Harmody, "you might as well ask the sheriff and his boys to try and catch a wild hawk. I'm telling you the truth. They'll never see hide nor hair of him."

"You mean that he is down here now?" shouted Peyton.

"He ain't near," replied Harmody. "The fact is that he's the kind that never hits below the belt. I've talked and argued with him. I've begged him to think it over because a killing is most usually murder in the eyes of the law. But he can't get it out of his head that he's made a promise to kill the three of 'em. Arguin' won't budge him." Then he added: "But he wants you all to be warned fair and square that he's coming after you. You'll kill him or he'll kill you."

THIS struck a silence across the room. Harmody went on: "You're the special one, Tierney, and he mostly wants to have the killing of you because he says that you sure killed his partner over at their mine."

"He's a madman," said Tierney. "Accusing me of murder, eh? All that man can see is red!"

"He says that there was around fifty pounds in gold dust. And he points out

that inside the last ten days you've made a payment on the land where you're going to live with Jacqueline, yonder. You've made that payment—"

"I don't follow all this!" exclaimed Tierney, loudly.

But Harmody said: "You can't drown me out till I've made my point. You made that payment with thirty pounds of the same sort of gold-dust."

"Will!" cried the girl.

"You damned sneaking blackguard!" shouted Tierney. He strode at Harmody, but Oliver Peyton stepped between and stopped the younger man.

"I know that you're a mighty brave and bright young man, Will," said Peyton, "but don't you start anything with Les Harmody. He's just too old and tough to be chewed up by youngsters."

Harmody backed up to the door.

"I come in here being sorry that I had to bring bad news," he said. "But the longer I've stayed here, the more I've felt that the kid is right. There's something damned rotten in the air. Tierney, I think the kid is right about you; and if you done that job, Lord help your soul!"

He was gone through the doorway at once.

Behind him, Tierney was saying, "Something has to be done about this. A skunk like that Cameron is going about the county poisoning the air with his lies—"

"Will," said the girl, "is it a lie?"

He spun about on his heel and confronted her, and her white face.

"Jack, are you believing him?" he shouted.

She stared at him for a moment. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know what to believe, except that John Cameron is an honest man!"

She saw everything clearly. It would be a battle of three against one, and poor John Cameron must die unless Harmody threw in with him. Even so, that meant a battle. There was one way to stop the fighting. That was to induce Cameron to leave the country. And if she could find the way to him—

This thought got her out of the room at once. In the corral she caught up her favorite mare and was quickly on the road. She turned in the saddle with a desperate eagerness, scanning the horizon, and so made out, very dimly, the movement of a shape over a hill and against the horizon.

She struck out in that direction at once. It was the eastern trail and she flew the mare along it for half a mile. After that she slowed to a walk and heard distinctly, out of the distance, the clacking of hoofs over a stretch of stony ground. She would have to go very carefully; she would have to hunt like an Indian if she wished to trail this man and remain unheard.

As she came up the next rise, it seemed to her that she heard other hoofbeats behind her; but that was, no doubt, a sheer mental illusion, or a trick of echoes. Before her in the night there was no longer sound or sight of the big horseman. She pressed on at a gallop, giving up all hope of secrecy in her pursuit. "Les!" she began to cry aloud. "Les Harmody!"

A deep-throated shout answered her at once; she saw the huge man and the huge horse looming against the stars on the next hummock.

"That you, Jacqueline?" asked Harmody, as she came up. "What's wrong?"

"Cameron is after my two brothers," she answered, "but he'll probably kill them—or they'll kill him."

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

"I want to beg John to leave the country."

"It's no use," said Harmody. "He won't go."

"I want to try, though. I have to try to persuade him."

"D'you like Cameron?"

"I like him a lot."

"Come along, then. A woman can always do what a man can't manage. I've begged him hard to give up this job. He's been like a stone, though."

THEY rode on together, leaving the trail presently and plunging into a thicket of brush higher than their heads. Finally, through the dark mist of brush, she could see the pale gleam of a light that showed them into a small clearing where the ruins of a squatter's shack leaned feebly to the side, ready to fall. By the fire Cameron answered the call of Harmody.

"Who's coming with you?" he snapped. "What made you—" He broke off when he saw the girl. He had been thinner when he last talked to her; but he looked older, now. Across one cheekbone was the jagged red of a new scar which time, perhaps, would gradually dim. He wore better clothes. Perhaps they helped him to a new dignity.

She went straight up to him when she had dismounted, and offered her hand.

"The last time, I insulted you by keeping silent when I should have spoken up," she said. "Can you forgive that, John?"

He took her hand with a touch softer than that of a woman. His grave eyes studied her face. "They told you the truth," he said. "I am a half-breed."

"It isn't the blood; it's the man that counts," she answered. "And I'm beginning to realize what a man you are. I guessed it when we walked up that road together. I knew it when I heard what you'd done to Les Harmody. It's because I know what a man you are that I've come here tonight."

"Les should never have brought you," said he.

"She follered me, John," protested Harmody. "Don't be hard on me about that. What was I to do? And besides, I thought that she might show you the best way out of this whole mess that you're in."

"That's it, of course," said Cameron, gloomily. "I have to be persuaded. But there's no good in that, Jacqueline. There's no good at all. I've given a promise that I'll have to keep."

She was silent.

"You see how it is?" said the grumbling voice of Harmody. "Nothing can budge him."

"There's only one thing I wish," said Cameron, "that none of them meant anything to you."

"Why do you wish that?" she asked him.

"You remember when we walked up the road together?"

"I'll never forget that."

"If I could keep you from sorrow, I'd like to. You know, Jacqueline, now that I see you here and remember that some of your look is in your brothers, I don't think that I could harm them. But Tierney—I know you're going to marry him—Tierney has to be rubbed off my books."

"He's nothing to me," said the girl.

"He has to be. You're marrying him!" exclaimed Cameron.

"I give you my word and my honor, he's nothing to me, tonight. Because I think—I really think—that he did the frightful thing you told me about."

"You're through with him?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe that," said Cameron, sternly. "If you love a man, you'll never give him up, even if he has a thousand murders on his back."

"It was never love. It was simply growing up together, and going riding and dancing together, and being encouraged by everyone."

"Ah?" said Cameron. "Would a woman marry a man for no better reasons than that?"

She felt the scorn and the horror in his voice. She flushed. "I'm afraid we do," she answered. "John, have you become

so hard, so stern? Is there no use, my trying to talk to you?"

"I can listen to you better than I can listen to running water in the desert. Sit down here, Jacqueline. Here by the fire. That's better. I can see your eyes now, you know. Whenever they stir, my heart stirs. When you look up at me like this, my heart leaps."

"Hey!" said Les Harmody. "You can't talk to a girl like that!"

"Can't I?" asked Cameron, startled. "Have I said something wrong?"

"Not a word!" said the girl.

"Help me to teach him something," said Harmody. "All he knows is hunting and reading. He don't know nothing about people. You can't let a gent talk to you like that."

"Why not? I like it," said she.

"But doggone it, Jacqueline, unless he loves you, or something like that—"

"I do," said Cameron. "Does that make it all right?"

"Hey, wait! Wait!" shouted Les Harmody. "What's the matter with you? You've only met her once before."

"It's true," said Cameron. "But that was more happiness in a few minutes than all the rest of my life put together."

"Well, then, you gotta learn not to say everything you think right out loud to a girl. They ain't used to it. You gotta spend a lot of time approaching a woman. You gotta be more doggone particular than when you come up on the blind side of a horse. Ain't I right, Jacqueline?"

"Not about John," she answered.

"Hold on! What's his special edge on the rest of us?"

"I don't know," said the girl. "But I like everything he says"

"Hold on, Jacqueline!" shouted Harmody. "Hold on, there! If you get ideas into his head, you'll never get them out again."

"I don't want to get them out again," she answered.

"Don't say that! I mean," explained Harmody, "that if you give him half a chance, he'll start ragin' like a doggone forest-fire."

The girl smiled up at Harmody. "You know a lot about girls, Les," she said, "but John Cameron happens to know a lot about me."

She put out a hand and touched the arm of Cameron.

"That's why I've had the courage to come up here tonight," she said. "It couldn't go on! John, you couldn't take the blood-trail behind my brothers."

"No," said Cameron, breathlessly, leaning towards her. "I couldn't lay a finger on them."

"And Tierney—leave him to the law. There is a law for that sort of a man!"

"I can't leave him. I told you that, before. If you were I—if you'd been raised by Wayland and then found him dying as I found him—wouldn't you despise yourself if you waited for the law to do your work on the murderer?"

She held her breath, fighting back the answer that rose into her throat, but it burst out in spite of her.

"Yes, I would!" she exclaimed. "I don't blame you a bit."

"Quit talking that way!" commanded Harmody "D'you know that you'll have him out raisin' hell right away, if you talk to him like that?"

"I'm only begging one thing," said the girl. "You've held your hand for a month. Will you wait another month before you take that trail? Will you let the law see what it can do, first of all?"

He dropped his face between his hands and stared at the fire. Les Harmody, making vast, vague signs of encouragement from the background, tiptoed to a little distance. The girl looked up at the giant with a flashing smile of confidence.

And John Cameron had raised his head to answer, the trouble gradually clearing

away from his eyes, when the voice of Tierney barked from the edge of the brush: "Stick up those hands! Fast!"

"What in hell—" began Harmody.

"You're out of this, Les!" shouted the voice of Joe Peyton.

Cameron had risen to his feet. The girl threw herself in front of him.

"Joe, don't shoot!" she screamed. "Will, don't shoot at him! The poor fellow didn't mean anything—he only has half a brain, Will!"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Death Trap

WILL TIERNEY came out from the brush at a strange, gliding pace, his feet touching the earth softly for fear that he might upset his aim, and his revolver held well out before his body.

"Get away from him, Jack!" he shouted. "Step away or I'll get him through you!"

Cameron had waited a single second, stunned. His gun belt and gun had been laid aside. His hands were empty, and death was stalking him; but what really mattered was that the girl had called him a "half-wit."

Had she come merely for the purpose of holding him and Les Harmody helpless while her fighting men came up to wipe out the "breed"?

He thought of that. Then he turned and dived for the brush. He ran as a snipe flies, dodging rapidly from side to side and yelling: "Harmody, it's my fight Stay out of it!"

He heard the scream of the girl, then the guns began to boom. Bullets whistled past his head, right and left; and then the sudden thunder of Les Harmody's voice broke in. The gun-fire continued. But the bullets no longer whirred past him.

The brush crashed before his face. He was instantly in the thick gloom of the foliage, safe for that moment, and he heard the shrill cry of the girl: "Will! You've killed Les Harmody!"

That voice struck him to a halt. He stood gripping at the trunk of a young sapling until the palm of his hand ached, and behind him he heard Harmody's deep, broken voice exclaiming: "I'm all right, Jacqueline. Don't worry about me. I'm all right. But I tell the rest of you for your own good—don't go into that brush after Cameron. If you go in there, he'll kill you. Keep out of the darkness—he ain't got a gun! But he's got hands that are almost as good as a gun."

They did not press into the brush, but Will Tierney exclaimed. "Here's hell to pay! It's the breed that ought to be lying here, not Harmody. Les, it's your own fault! If you hadn't got in between me and my aim, I'd have Cameron dead as a bone. He dodged, damn him, he dodged like a bird in the air! I never saw such a rabbit!"

"You never saw such a man-eater, either," declared Harmody. "And he'll chaw your bones one day, Mister Murderer Tierney."

"Murderer?" shouted Tierney. "You mean to say that you believe his yarn about me?"

"Stop talking, Les!" commanded the girl. "Save your breath. Help me carry him into the shack, Joe—Harry, take his shoulders. Does that hurt you, Les? Gently, boys."

Back to the edge of the clearing ventured Cameron and from the thick of the brush watched the men carrying huge Les Harmody through the open door of the shack. Will Tierney, coming back into the clearing, kicked some more fuel onto the fire and made the flames jump. The brighter light seemed to be a comfort to him. He walked in an uneasy circle around the fire, staring toward the brush.

In the meantime, the conference inside the cabin could be heard clearly as it progressed. They were examining the wound of Harmody. Once he groaned aloud as though under a searching probe. Then the girl was saying: "He ought to have a doctor. I'll stay here with him. But he ought to have a doctor by the morning. The three of you go straight for town."

"I'll stay here with you, Jack," said Harry Peyton.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," she answered. "What if John Cameron knew that there was only one man here?"

"He hasn't a gun," said Harry Peyton.

"He has his wits and his hands, and that's enough," said big Les Harmody. "Jacqueline is dead right. The three of you had better stay close together all the time."

Tierney stepped to the door of the shack. "Bah!" he snarled. "I'd like nothing better than to tackle him—alone!"

"I think you like murder better'n you would ever like fighting," said Les Harmody.

"When you're on your feet," answered Tierney, "I'll give you your chance at me, any time!"

"Thanks," said Harmody. "I'll take you up on that, one day."

"Be still!" commanded the girl. "The three of you start riding—and start now. Keep bunched. Head for Gallop and get Doc Travis. We don't have to worry about Les for a while. Those big ribs of his turned the bullet a bit. And it's better to have broken ribs than a bullet through the heart. Will—you fired to kill!"

"The fool came in my path," said Tierney. "What else was I to do? He came between me and Cameron."

"Who gave you the right to murder John Cameron?" she demanded.

"You talk as though I were a butcher, Jack!"

"I think you are," she answered.

A strange joy rushed through the brain of Cameron, as he listened.

"Jack," cried Tierney, "does it mean that you're through with me?"

"I never want to see your face again!" she replied.

Tierney strode into the shack, shouting something that was lost to the straining ears of Cameron, because all the men were speaking at once.

Then, through a pause, Cameron could hear Tierney crying out: "You prefer him, maybe?"

"I prefer John Cameron—I don't care what you call him!" she answered.

NOT care! Not care even when he was called a breed? Did she, in truth, prefer John Cameron? He, lingering on the trembling verge of the firelight, the shadows wavering across his eyes, felt a weakness in the knees, a vague and uncertain awe.

The brothers were protesting. Harry Peyton was thundering: "Jack, you don't mean it! You can't mean it. A half-breed? I'd rather see you—"

"Shut your mouth, Harry," said the profound voice of Les Harmody. "Don't you speak to her like that!"

The three men came striding out of the shack a moment later. "It's no good," Tierney was saying. "You can see that she's hypnotized by Cameron. Joe, I'm going to have the killing of him."

"Not if I can get to him with a gun first," answered Joe.

They went away across the clearing, hastily, and as the brush closed after them, cracking behind their backs, there was a great impulse in Cameron to run for one instant to the girl he loved, and to Les Harmody who with his own body had stopped the bullets that were intended for his friend.

Some rich day would come when he would have a chance to show Harmody

that he was quite ready to die for him.

He could understand, too, why the girl had called him a half-wit. It had been her first gesture towards stopping the attack of big Will Tierney, to assure him that his rival was a creature of no importance.

But there was something more for Cameron to do than to speak to the woman he loved or to touch the hand of his friend. He had to strike Tierney. If God would let him, he had to strike at Tierney now, and he was on foot, he was weaponless, and there were three men against him, two of whom were sacred from any serious injury at his hands.

As the idea dawned in the mind of Cameron, it seemed at first totally absurd. But he knew that Tierney would probably get out of the country as fast as possible. Tierney had lost his chance at the rich marriage; there now hung over his head the accusation of murder; and there was nothing to hold him in this part of the world except, perhaps, a desire to wipe out Cameron. But the great chances were that Tierney would ride with the Peytons, go as far as Gallop, deliver the message to the doctor, and then slip away towards an unknown destination.

There was no time to catch him, therefore, except on this night. And already the horses of the three were galloping steadily away.

They would turn down through the hills and take the long, straight road offered by Lucky Chance Ravine, which pointed straight on at the town of Gallop. It was his consciousness of the probable course they would follow that taught Cameron what he could do. The riders would have to wind down through the hills to come to the head of the steep-walled ravine. For his own part, he could strike straight across and climb the walls wherever he chose.

As he ran, he made his hands work. He snatched off his shirt, tore it into strips, and began to knot the tough strings together. He could have laughed to think that this was his weapon against three mounted, armed men.

Meantime he had been running as few people can. He had left the woods, slipped through a pass between two hills, and so found himself on the rim of Lucky Chance Ravine. It ran straight east towards Gallop, bordered with cliffs to the north and south, sheer faces of rock.

It was not hard to get down the cliff-face. On the level floor of the ravine, Cameron dodged among the rocks until he came to a narrows where the only clear passage was a ten foot gap between two very large rocks.

This was the strategic point for him; it was the thought of this gap through which the riders must pass in single file that had started him for Lucky Chance Ravine. And now he heard the distant clattering of hoofs that moved towards him with the steady lope which Western horses understand, that effortless, pausing swing of the body, slower than any other gallop.

He had very little time for his preparations, but his plan was simple enough. He knotted one end of his clumsy rope around a ragged projection on the side of one boulder, then he crouched beside the other great rock with the loose end in his grip. The slack of the twisted rope lay flat on the ground.

He had hardly taken his place before he saw them coming. He was crouched so low that he could see the heads and shoulders of the two in the lead against the stars, so that they seemed to be sweeping through the sky. Well behind them came the third. He prayed that the last rider might be Will Tierney!

He gauged his moment with the most precise care, then jerked up the rope and laid his weight against it. Well below the knees of the horse the rope struck.

There was a jerk that hurled Cameron head over heels, but as he rolled he saw horse and rider topple.

AS HE scrambled to his feet the mustang was beginning to rise, snorting, and the rider lay prone and still at a little distance. Cameron caught the reins of the mustang and led it to the fallen rider. He had to lean close to make out the features of the man in the dull starlight; and with a groan he recognized Joe Peyton.

He thrust his hand inside Peyton's shirt and pressed it above the heart until he felt the reassuring pulsation. Not dead, but badly knocked out.

He got Joe Peyton's gun and flung himself on the back of the horse. It was at full gallop in a moment, speeding after the distant beat of hoofs.

At full speed he rushed the horse, pressing its flanks with his spurs, and so the leading pair of riders came back to him through the night, growing visible, then larger and larger.

"All right, Joe?" shouted Harry Peyton.

He uttered a wordless whoop for answer, and the leaders sped on, unsuspicious. He could distinguish them one from the other, now. Will Tierney was in the lead. Harry Peyton was two or three lengths behind Tierney. Therefore it was beside him that Cameron rushed his mustang, bringing the horse up so fast that Peyton had only time to twist in the saddle and cry out once in astonishment—for he could see, now, the gleam of the bare skin of Cameron.

His cry was cut short; a clip across the head struck with the long barrel of Cameron's revolver dropped Peyton out of his saddle. Cameron, catching the loosened reins of the other horse, jerked the mustang to a halt. And at the same time the yell of Will Tierney flashed across his brain.

Men said that Will Tierney feared nothing human. He must have thought, then, that half-naked Cameron was a devil and not a man; for he dropped himself low over his saddle bow, gave his horse the spur, and raced it towards the distant lights of Gallop.

Cameron had a strange feeling that luck was with him; that having helped him past the first two stages of his night's work, it would not fail him in the last, important moment.

But he found that Tierney was drawing away from him. Big Will Tierney, twisting in the saddle, tried three shots in rapid succession, and missed his mark. But to Cameron there would be no proper revenge in merely shooting a fugitive through the back. That would not repay him for the death of his friend. So he held his fire, and rode harder than before.

In another moment he had his reward. The far finer horse of Tierney had opened up a gap in the beginning, but the much greater weight of Tierney made up the difference after the first burst of speed. His mount began to flag, while the tough mustang that labored between the knees of Cameron gained steadily.

Tierney dodged his horse through a nest of boulders. The mustang followed like a true cutting horse on the tail of a calf. Cameron was not a length behind when Tierney turned and fired again.

And the mustang went down like a house of cards. The earth rose. Cameron's head struck fire through his brain. He fell into a thick darkness and lay still.

When he roused, at last, he was dripping with water. Another quantity of it had been sloshed over him by the figure that stood tall and black against the stars. A groan had passed involuntarily through the lips of Cemeron.

"Coming to, kid?" asked Tierney's voice cheerfully. "I thought you'd never come around. Feeling better?"

Cameron tried to move, but found that

his legs and hands had been bound together with something harder and colder than twine. Then he realized that he had been bound with wire—hard bound, so that the iron ground the flesh against the bones of his wrist and his ankle.

He stared up at the stars and found them whirling into fire. Nearby, there was the sound of swiftly whispering water. And gradually he realized what had happened, and the sort of a death that he was likely to die.

CHAPTER SIX

A Dead Man's Lesson

"I'M TO go the way that Mark Wayland went, eh?" asked Cameron. Tierney had been carrying the revivifying water from the creek in Cameron's hat. Now he swished the hat idly back and forth, the final drops whipping into Cameron's face.

"Sure you're going the way of Mark Wayland. But to hell with him. Think about yourself!"

"Wayland," said Cameron, as the confession came from Tierney, "never did harm to any man. Why did you murder him?"

"Want to know what he did to me?"

"Nothing wrong!" declared Cameron.

"If you say that again, I'll kick your face in!" said Tierney. "Listen: Five years ago, when I was feeling pretty good, I got into a fight with a fool—I never had any use for breeds."

"I know," agreed Cameron.

He was trying to think. Mark Wayland had always said a good brain could cut a man's way through any difficulty. What device could he find to free himself from the danger of death now? At least, he might keep Tierney talking for a little time. Every moment saved was a chance gained, in that sense.

"This one," said Tierney, "got me down on the floor of the barroom, and I pulled out a gun and let him have some daylight in him. Then another man came—Mark Wayland. He heard what had happened and started for me. I pulled the gun on him, but he was a little faster."

Tierney rubbed his right arm. "Clipped me through the arm so that my gun dropped and then he turned me over to the sheriff. The sheriff didn't want to pinch me, but after Wayland had done the pinching, the law started working. Nothing but murder. And me headed straight for the rope. But I managed to work my way out of the jail, one night. That's one of the good things about this country—their cheesecloth jails."

He recommenced on the theme of Wayland. "You were saying that Wayland never did anybody harm. If I'd hanged, that would have been harm, wouldn't it? And living these years, never knowing when somebody might turn up and recognize me—that wasn't harm, eh?"

"Did Wayland recognize you?" asked Cameron.

"I had a mask over my mug. I lay up there behind the rocks and watched you start out hunting. Then I slipped down to the shack and whanged him over the head. It was easy. I wired him up, and touched a match to the cabin."

It was strange and at the same time a horrible thing to look straight into the mind of a man without the slightest sense of right and wrong.

Big Will Tierney sat down on a convenient rock and lighted a cigarette. "I thought that he'd break down," he said, "when I pointed out what I was going to do—light the cabin and let him roast. But he locked up his jaws and didn't say anything. A queer thing, Cameron. I was almost scared from just sittin' there and looking into the cold of his eyes. It almost made me think of hell—you know."

"And you went ahead!" muttered Cameron.

"Wouldn't I have been a fool not to? I'd found the gold in the sacks. I needed that money, and I needed it damn bad. Old Peyton was too dead set against me marrying his girl unless I showed that I was able to take care of her. He said that he'd never put up the money for me to live easy. He's always seen through me a little. He's the only one of the Peyton family that has—until you came along, damn you!"

THERE was no particular venom in that last speech. He shrugged his shoulders and went on: "Not that I give a damn about having Jacqueline wise to me. I never cared a rap about her. But I wanted her slice of the Peyton money when it came due. That old swine has a couple of millions. Know that?"

"I knew that he had money. Where did you kill this other man?"

"You'd like to use that on me, wouldn't you? Why, it was a little side trip I made down to Phoenix when I was a kid. If you live till tomorrow, you're welcome to use the news wherever you please."

Tierney laughed. He had a fine, mellow-sounding laughter, and the strength of it forced back his head.

"But damn the Peyton money," he went on. "I'll get along without it. I would have had to play a part with Jacqueline all my life, anyway, and I don't like to do that. Unless I decided to raise so much hell with her that the old man would buy me off with a good lump sum. But I've never had to work my way, and I never will have to. Always too many suckers like you and Wayland. They dig out the coin and wise birds like me get it." He laughed again.

The brain of Cameron was spinning. "Tell me something, will you?" he asked.

"Sure. I'll tell you anything you want to know. It's the sort of pleasure that I've never had till now—talking what I please to a fellow who's going to be dead inside of a few minutes. It's like whispering secrets into a grave, kid!" He began to laugh again, highly pleased by this thought.

"Well—tell me if you ever had a friend."

"Friends? I've had a dozen of 'em. Look at the two Peyton fellows. I've got the wool pulled over their eyes a yard deep. Sure I've had friends. I get a friend, use him, chuck him away. That's my idea. Now, let's talk business."

"What kind of business."

"The way you're to die."

"There's the creek."

"You'd like that," agreed Tierney.

Tierney stood up and stretched. "Tell me something. D'you think you broke the skulls of both Harry and Joe?"

"No. They're only a little knocked out," answered Cameron.

"Too bad," murmured Tierney. "They're a pair of wooden dummies, and I'm tired of 'em. But what am I going to do about you, old son?" He leaned over Cameron. "Where'd you get golden spurs?"

"My friend gave them to me. Les Harmody."

"The hell he did! Why would Les be chucking away money on someone like you?"

"He said it was to show that he thought I was as good as any man."

"Did he? Well, you're not. Understand? When I've taken these spurs off, I'll show you what I think about you!"

He leaned still farther. With an instinctive reaction, Cameron pulled his feet away, doubling his knees high.

"Good!" said Tierney. "Going to be some struggling, eh? That's what I want. That's what I like. Put up a good fight, kid! I hate to hook a fish that won't do some wriggling!"

He stepped forward to catch Cameron by one foot. His head was low. The target was not unattainable. And Cameron

let drive with his heels at the head of Tierney—with the golden spurs of Les Harmody he struck out, making his supple body into a great snapping whiplash.

Tierney, seeing the shadow of the danger at the last instant, yelled out and tried to dodge. But the spurs tore across the flesh of his chin and the heels themselves thudded against the bone of his jaw. He fell on his face.

CAMERON came to life, moving as a snake moves. He got the revolver from the holster at the side of Tierney, first. The big fellow already was beginning to move a little as Cameron held the weapon in both hands and with two bullets severed the wires that bound him at the knees and at the ankles.

It was a harder, an almost impossible task to get a bullet through the wires that confined his two wrists. To manage that, he had to hold the Colt between his feet, pressing his wrists over the uptilted muzzle of the gun until one strand of the wire was against the muzzle of it. But he could not keep the flesh of the wrists from pressing over the muzzle together with the wires.

He managed to get the middle finger of his left hand over the trigger of the gun; another extra pressure and the explosion followed. Hot irons seemed to tear the soft flesh inside his wrists—but his hands were free.

And there was Tierney on his feet at last, staggering a little, then snatching at a second gun as he realized what had happened. Cameron shot low, aiming between the hip and the knee, and saw the big fellow pitched to one side. He struck on both hands, the gun spinning to a distance. Then he reclined there as though he had been struck down by a spear.

"It's not possible!" shouted Tierney. "Cameron, don't shoot—please don't shoot!"

Cameron went to the fallen gun and kicked it back toward big Will Tierney.

"I ought to cut you down and kill you the way you were going to murder me, Tierney," he said. "But I'm not going to do that. Wayland taught me a different way of living. There's the gun inside your reach. Grab it up. Fill your hand and take your chance."

"What chance?" groaned Tierney. "I'm bleeding to death! Cameron, do something—help me! If you try to shoot it out now, I won't lift a hand. It'll be murder."

"Look!" said Cameron. "I'm sitting on the ground exactly like you, now. I'm putting the gun down just the way yours is lying. Now fill your hand and fight—you yellow dog!"

But Tierney, spilling suddenly forward along the ground, buried his face in his arms and began to groan for mercy.

That was why Cameron, his soul sick with disgust, brought Tierney into the town of Gallop with the feet of his prisoner tied under the belly of the horse. A crowd formed instantly, men ran from the saloons; and some of these were sent off to rouse the doctor and prepare him for a trip.

Tierney, when he saw familiar faces, began to make a frantic appeal: "Bob—Sam—Bill—hey, Bill—help me out of this. The breed shot me from behind. I'm bleeding to death! Bill, are you going to let me go like this?"

He held out his hands in appeal. Cameron rode beside him with no gun displayed. He made a picture that filled the eyes of men, however, and kept them at a distance. For blood had run and dried from a thousand scratches, and naked as he was to the waist, he looked like a savage come back from war with a captive.

Harry Peyton and the gray-headed sheriff appeared at the same time, Harry shouting: "There he is, sheriff! There he is now. I'll help you get him!"

Harry Peyton had a thick bandage

around his head, but otherwise he appeared perfectly well. He was pulling out a gun as he ran. The sheriff stopped that.

"If there's any gunwork wanted, I'll call for it," he said.

The crowd had become still thicker. Men held back from actually stopping the progress of Cameron, but they drew nearer and nearer. "Are you the sheriff?" Cameron called out.

"I am," said the other, wading through the crowd.

"Then I'm turning Tierney over to you," said Cameron. "I'm charging him with the murder of Mark Wayland."

The sheriff came up, panting. Harry Peyton was at his shoulder, glowering, ready for battle. "You let me down, Harry." snarled Tierney.

"What's this charge of murder?" demanded the sheriff. "Are you wounded, Tierney. This looks like a damned black night's work for you, Cameron! Hold that horse. Harry, help me get Tierney off his horse. Cut that rope."

Now that the horses were stopped, the men pressed suddenly close from every side. There was a shout from the rear of the crowd. "Hang the breed! Lynch him!"

Cameron leaned from the saddle and gripped the shoulder of the sheriff.

"Are you going to listen to me?" he demanded. And the green glare of his eyes struck a sudden awe through the man of the law.

"I'm listening to you," said the sheriff, scowling. "What's this talk about murder?"

"He killed Mark Wayland. He confessed it to me tonight."

"Confessed? What made him confess?"

"When he had me lying on the ground and tied with wire—the way he tied Wayland before he burned down the shack at the mine."

"What kind of a liar will you listen to, Sheriff?" demanded big Will Tierney. "He shot me from behind—"

"Here's one proof," said Cameron, and he held out his wrists, covered with blood, and the powder burns were horrible to see. The sheriff frowned and a curse of wonder escaped from his lips.

"It's true!" he said, suddenly.

"You'll find the wound in his leg, whether he was shot from behind or not,"

In the August Issue!

FAST MAN—LAST MAN

By William R. Cox

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said Cameron. "And if you want to know more than that, send down to Phoenix. They've wanted him for murder there for five years. They'll want him still."

HE SAID it loudly, and the muttering of the crowd was blanketed in a sudden silence. The sheriff said: "Look at me, Tierney. Is this true? Have you been a damn wolf in sheepskin, all this time?"

"Wait a minute!" yelled Tierney. "You wouldn't believe a breed against my word, would you? You wouldn't—"

"Shut up," said the sheriff. "You're under arrest. Cameron, I can see that I've got to thank you for doing a job that I should have handled myself. Tierney, you look as guilty as hell, and hell is where you'll wind up, with a hangman's rope to start you on the way."

It may have been that the loss of blood and the successive shocks to his nerves had weakened Tierney, but now at the very moment when he should have rallied himself to make a last desperate appeal to the crowd which might have favored him, his nerve gave way. With one hand he gripped at his throat as though already he felt the rope about it, and slowly turning his head he stared at Cameron—a look that Cameron would never forget.

Then they carried him towards the jail.

The sheriff lingered to say, loudly: "The next man I hear anyone calling Cameron a breed had better come and tell me the same thing. There's no dirt on his skin that soap won't take off!"

It was the same fellow who had yelled for a lynching who now started a new demonstration. Cameron marked him clearly. Perhaps, seeing how the wind was blowing, from this unexpected quarter, the man wanted to bury his other remark under new fervor. But it was he who proposed cheers for "Cameron", and the crowd, falling into the spirit of the thing, cheered itself hoarse and then trooped back into the saloons to start a celebration.

Cameron himself by that time was riding at the shoulder of the doctor, with Harry Peyton on the other side of him, and Joe Peyton in the rear. The brothers said nothing. They were not the kind to waste words, but neither, Cameron was sure, were they the sort to nourish grudges. And that was how they came back to the shack where big Les Harmody was lying.

When he heard them coming, Harmody shouted a question. The voice of Cameron answered.

And a cry of great happiness broke from the throat of the wounded man.

There was not much need of talk. When Harry and Joe, who had started with Tierney, returned with Cameron and the doctor, it was a fairly clear proof that everything was altered in the affairs of Cameron.

There was one anxious pause while the doctor made his examination of Harmody, then the medico looked up quickly with a smile.

"Luck and an extra heavy set of ribs have saved you, Harmody!" he said.

An involuntary gasp of relief came from the lips of Cameron and, hearing that, Harmody held out a sudden great hand towards him.

"Old son!" he said.

Cameron caught the hand and gripped it as hard as he could.

"The two of us, always, Les!" he exclaimed.

"Fine!" said Harmody. "But suppose we make it three?"

He looked across at the girl and she, from her place beside the bed, forced her head up until she was looking with great eyes straight at Cameron. She began to smile in a way half fond and half foolish, and Cameron knew that he had reached the end of pain.

By Henry F. Church

Kooly cut the rope with a single shot.

WAGON-TRAIL INTRIGUE

Wagon-boss Jed Kooly knew what he wanted—but could he pay the price when the cost was another man's life?

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NEARING South Pass the bull train, with its patient, plodding oxen, and its weary but hopeful emigrants, had come in sight of the first upthrust of the Rockies when Tony and Maria came under the official notice of

Jed Kooly, the quick-thinking wagon boss.

Perhaps, in all the disorder of that dust-covered company, bound for the beckoning valley of Sacramento, he would not have noticed them at all had he not happened upon Maria generously seasoning an antelope stew with wild onions.

Looking very tough and competent in his flat-crowned hat, and with his faded overalls cuffed over his gaudy boots, he drew rein on his paint pony and looked down at the girl. Dark, beautiful, she busied herself at the evening cook-fire; and her presence puzzled him. During the two months in which he had guided the half-hundred wagons westward along the Oregon Trail, he had come to know most of his charges by name, and much of their personal history, but here was a girl new to him, and prettier, he reckoned, than even Crenton Kent's wife, who had been elected belle of the bull train. The onions gave him his chance.

"You mean you goin' to eat 'em, ma'am?" he asked gravely.

Glancing up at him shyly, Maria thought that he was almost as handsome as Tony. Certainly his hair was as black, and he was as tall, but his eyes were gray and hard like flint. They vaguely frightened her, but, since he was grinning good-naturedly, she ventured a smile as shy as her glance.

Softly apologetic, she explained to him that of English she spoke not too well, but perhaps if he would but speak with Tony....

Kooly climbed down from his saddle with lazy grace, and pretended to be greatly interested in this business of putting weeds in antelope stew, but it was the olive-tinted, symmetrical face of the girl, framed with smoothly-combed, blue-black hair, that really claimed his attention.

"Who's Tony?" he drawled.

"My husband, please, meester."

"Oh," said Kooly, disappointed. "How come you two didn't report in?"

Confusion seized her. "Perhaps Tony..." she began, but words failed her and she started to weep softly.

Kooly was quick to soothe her. "Aw, now, that's all right, only I'm the wagon boss, an' I'm supposed to know who's along."

"Of that we were frightened. We have now no money. Please, meester, do not leave us again for the Indians!"

"I ain't said nothin' about makin' you ante-in, have I? Where's this Tony?" asked the wagon boss.

Just then a rich baritone raised in song as a man approached through the gathering dusk, laden with greasewood for the cook-fire. The song carried a tune and words alien to Kooly, but he thought that it was mighty pretty. Somehow it seemed to fit in with the girl exactly.

Maria spoke rapidly in Italian, and Tony came forward shyly, white teeth flashing and a large calloused hand extended. Except for his eyes he might have passed for a slightly older brother of the wagon boss.

At their timid invitation Jed Kooly took pot-luck, and found the flavoring of the wild onions to be good. Listening, he concealed his growing astonishment as the voluble Tony told how, many weeks before, he had set out with his new bride for the California goldfields, and, alone with her in a two-mule wagon, had covered hundreds of miles through Indian-infested country, which, he admitted with a shrug, was a danger they had discounted until they had come across an ambushed wagon train with its smouldering embers and its scalpless dead. Then they were frightened.

TROUBLE had pursued them. In the midst of a storm, lightning destroyed the wagon and one of the mules, leaving him and Maria unhurt. With only a salvaged axe as a weapon, they had come at last upon the wagon-train.

And now, here they were.

"Gosh-a-mighty!" sighed Kooly, when the story, dramatic in its simplicity, was ended. He got up and whistled to his patient pony. It had been a lucky trip so far, with no sign of Indians, but, with Tony's story fresh in his mind, he decided to take extra precautions. "I'll fix you up, tomorrow," he promised. "You'll fit in."

In addition to the wagons of the emigrants, the train had also a string of freighters with trailers, manned by a tough and experienced crew. With these stalwarts as a nucleus Kooly summoned the other males of the party and ordered a general tightening of the circle. Wagons were moved in compactly, so that the tongue of each snugly overlapped the rear wheels of the preceding vehicle; an extra guard, in charge of the night-herder, was placed over the animals, and a keen-eyed watch was set at the four points of the compass. Although some, lulled by the peacefulness of the passage across the plains, protested, camp fires were ordered doused, and the usual evening singing was hushed.

These precautions were well taken. At midnight, under a full moon, a roving band of Sioux swooped down, but, under the fussilade that met them, they retreated, with several riderless ponies galloping on their flanks.

Elated at the victory, Kooly checked his people and found none badly hurt, but when he came to the camping spot of Tony and Maria he found them gone.

Kooly at once called a council and it was decided that the extra watch would be held throughout the night, against the possibility of a return attack, and that, at daybreak, a scouting party would be sent out to search the nearby country on the chance that the inexperienced pair might have run off in fright.

"Why don't you let 'em go? We don't know 'em, anyhow," said Creed, the gambler. "If I were running this bull train, I'd push on at once, and gain the protection of the hills. We're a week late, as it is!"

"But you ain't runnin' this bull train," drawled Kooly. He didn't like this blond dandy, with his overly smooth manners. Creed was traveling light as a paying member with Crenton Kent. It was rumored that Kent and his red-headed wife were at odds.

"I've seen better managed trains," continued Creed. "Only yesterday I was talking with Mistress Kent, and—"

"I'd thank you to leave the name of my wife unspoken in public," interrupted Kent, and went into a spell of coughing. He was a small man, with a pasty complexion. There were a number of heartless bets that he would not last the trip through to the Sacramento.

Creed laughed, in a manner too plainly intended to show how matters stood in the Kent outfit, and the laughter drew Kooly's wrath. "Creed," he said, "you'll shake down with Herman Schultz for the rest o' the trip, beginnin' now."

Schultz, a florid German, said, "I don't mindt—mooch. By Tamn, I'm a bachelor!"

"Then help Creed lug over," ordered Kooly, and dismissed the gathering.

At dawn Tony returned without Maria and his grief was loud and genuine. He had found her apron. "Maria is lost to me!" he wailed.

Kooly ordered the train to move on under the direction of Quid Bramley, his lanky assistant, and called for three volunteers to accompany him on the search. To his surprise Tony did not offer to go, but sat there weeping. Creed stepped up. "I'll take his place," he sneered.

"You specialize in that, don't you?" growled Kooly, and turned him down. It was then that he noticed the broken arrow-shaft in Tony's shoulder.

Later, in a small gully, he found Maria,

weeping but unharmed. "I want to die, please," she sobbed, "they've keeled my Tony!"

Kooly looked at the badly hacked forms of three Indians, sprawled in the vicinity, and chuckled. "I allow that hombre thinks fair o' you," he told her. "C'mon, let's get back before he cries the eyes out of his haid!"

THAT reunion was something to remember, with Tony trying to weep, laugh, and sing, all at the same time, and the thankful, bright-eyed girl making much over his bandaged shoulder.

"Ain't that a picture, now?" laughed Kooly. Then, suddenly becoming grave, he rode down the line to the Kent wagon. "I want to borrow yore wife, Cren," he told the sickly little man, and drew close to a straining wheel ox, so that she could mount behind him.

She held her balance with one soft arm about his shoulder, and a wisp of her dark red hair, caught in the morning breeze, brushed across his cheek, bringing with it a faint odor of lilac. It was a source of wonder to him how, in the sweltering heat and the grinding dust, she managed to keep so fresh and dainty. She certainly wasn't cut out for pioneering, he thought.

"I'm glad you came," she said. "Tell me, Jed, what happened last night?"

"I heard tell we had a call from the Injun welcomin' committee," he evaded, knowing well to what she referred.

They came abreast of the wagon where Tony and Maria rode as guests of honor, and he pointed to the happy couple. "I wanted to show you a picture what would be good for yore soul, Mistress Kent," he told her. "That, ma'am, is my idee what true wedlock means."

To his surprise she slapped him a stinging blow across the cheek, and slipped down to the ground to stand defiantly by the side of the trail, until her wagon came up.

Trouble, whether his own or another's, didn't stay with Kooly long. Thankful that marriage, as yet, hadn't entered his own head, he rode on, humming a favorite ditty.

At the eleven o'clock grazing he dropped back to Kent's wagon intending to ask Mistress Kent's pardon. But he decided he wouldn't when, in the shady lee of the wagon, he saw the auburn-haired girl, sitting with her head nestled contentedly against her husband's shoulder.

In time they entered South Pass, and its flanking sentinels of towering peaks, its sweet-scented pine and spruce, took the place of the endless prairie blanket of buffalo-grass and wild onions. Progress became more difficult as the trail led upward. The trailers were detached from the heavily laden freighters, necessitating frequent relays. Kooly met the delay, in part, by ordering three drives a day, instead of the customary two, but, while some of the emigrants growled at the additional work, the majority, heartened by the change of scene and their nearing goal, were cheerfully patient.

At the last frontier of the wild onions, the wagon boss had gathered a sizable bunch of the pungent herb, and these he saved until an unlucky black bear provided a juicy steak. Inviting himself to dinner with Tony and Maria, he was not pleased when Creed climbed out of a nearby wagon and joined them.

"Thought you was hangin' out with Schultz," commented Kooly.

"I didn't care for him."

"That was my order, mister."

"I elected to ignore it."

Kolly's jaw hardened. "Maybe we'll call for a recount. What's yore new arrangement?"

"Simple enough. Larson had two wagons, and I bought one for my young friends, here. I'm traveling with them."

Maria squeezed Creed's arm gratefully. "Oh, but we love theese Americans so

much for their good kindness! Such a good country, where all men get—what you call a fair break!"

"Yeah, these American sports are very fine! No?" contributed the contented Tony.

"No!" replied Kooly, and finished the meal without further comment.

When Maria was clearing up, Kooly got to his feet and invited the gambler to accompany him for a walk.

"Well?" demanded Creed, when they were some distance from the circle of camp fires.

"You don't need no tellin'!" snapped the wagon boss, and his hard fist cracked against Creed's jaw, even as the latter reached for his pistol. Kooly sent the weapon spinning out of reach. "Tonight," he said, "you'll move back with Schultz."

FOR the next week, just to make sure that the gambler didn't horn in again, Kooly spent more time abreast of Tony's wagon than his solicitude as wagon boss necessitated. Tony's shoulder was mending, and he laughed much as he guided his plodding beasts, and along the wagon train there could always be heard his throaty baritone.

As his friendship with the Italian couple increased there was within Kooly a growing uneasiness of spirit, which at first he couldn't fathom, but, in time, he came to know that it had to do with Maria. That, he repeatedly told himself, was not right; and he was seriously thinking of leaving the train in the care of Bramley and pushing on alone, for one night, under a bright moon, he took Maria in his arms.

For a moment her warm, soft lips clung to his own, and then, starry-eyed, she pushed him gently from her. "Do not forget, please, my husband—Tony!" she sobbed, and ran quickly from him.

He walked the night through, cursing himself for his perfidy, and, in the early dawn, went to see Tony. Manfully, eye to eye, Kooly told him what had happened.

Tony shrugged. "Maria did tell me last night, and I was worried, but now it is all right, and again we are friends. No?"

"Yes!" said Kooly, and clasped his hand.

"One cannot help but love my Maria!" Tony told him, and the incident was closed.

Kooly decided to play safe. At the noon council he told his people that he was leaving the train under Bramley while he pushed on to Sacramento. There was a smug smile on the face of Creed at that, but it faded when the wagon boss announced that Creed, being in such a lather to get started gambling, was going with him. They left after the midday meal.

Arriving at Sacramento, Bramley did not find Kooly awaiting him, and he was worried. Except for the climate, things weren't so hot at the gold capital. The town was crowded and prices were high. He learned that not only was the American River staked solidly, but that the Feather and the Yuba, along with every wet gulch and ravin, smack up to the Sierra Mountains, had been preëmpted by the hordes who had poured in from all directions. Bramley gathered his charges and advised them to strike out independently for less congested regions, and, with the exception of the freighters, the train broke up.

Lest he should lose his crew to the gold fever, and the dissipated joys of booming Sacramento, he left word for Kooly, and moved on to the more sedate town of Dutchman's Luck, there to await his boss, and rest his beasts.

Tony, who was scared, and Kent, who was sick, decided to tag along.

A week passed with Bramley anxiously watchful, and when he deducted his just share from the allotments paid in by the emigrants; deposited Kooly's part with Two-Gun Tuck, who ran the leading saloon, he pushed on with his freight for his coastal destination.

Tony found that there were no unstaked

claims on any creek, and that it was dangerous even to take up a spot in the dry gullies, lest, ignorantly, one should jump another's property and find himself swinging from a hempen rope.

This perplexed him. Gold, he had thought, could be picked up like pebbles, and he was coming to find that no one was very helpful. He and Maria stopped eating. He had no credit, and for every job there were fifty discouraged and impoverished men, but, when Tuck offered to give Maria work in his big dance hall, Tony politely declined for her, thanking Tuck for his thoughtfulness. When Tuck, in the face of the protest, took the proposition directly to Maria, Tony put him in bed with a fractured jaw. That made it more difficult than ever. No one would hire a man who shortly would be dead.

THEN came apparent opportunity. A benign individual offered to trade with Tony a paying claim in exchange for his team and wagon, which he had managed to keep. The deal was made and Tony received a deed in writing, which neither he nor Maria could read. The claim was neither good nor bad, and, by mighty striving, they managed to avoid starvation.

Then came a day when an ominous group tore down their shabby tent and led Tony away with a rope around his neck. Maria followed, mute with terror. They marched him into Dutchman's Luck, and tossed the rope over a convenient limb. It was Maria's lone, piercing shriek that attracted the attention of Kooly, as he rode into town leading Creed's horse.

Tony's feet were already off the ground when Kooly cut the rope with a single shot. He was known to many of the crowd from other trips, and he got a respectful hearing.

"Where's the sheriff?"

"We ain't never seen none," announced a huge, bearded man who held the slack end of the hang rope, impatiently waiting.

"Then who's in charge o' this party?"

No one seemed to know, except that Two-Gun Tuck had said it ought to be done.

"Oh, him, huh? What's the charge?"

A raw-boned man stopped out. "I'm Mack Preston. He jumped my claim, while I was laid up sick."

"Well, let's hear Tony's side o' it," drawled Kooly. Still chocking, the victim edged forward, beseechingly holding out his supposed deed.

Still on his horse, Kooly reached down and took it. "Listen to this!" he said, shaking his head sadly. " 'Even as Jacob lifted the heritage of Esau, so lift I the team and wagon of Tony Angelo, in exchange for the claim of Mack Preston, while temporarily he doesn't need it. Selah! Signed Deacon Whipshed.' "

"That squares it with me," said Mack Preston sheepishly. "I know the Deacon. If the young feller is willin' I'll put him to work."

"Hooray for Jed!" howled a voice, and the crowd echoed it.

"That's fine," said Kooly. "That sort of makes it unanimous."

"Makes what unanimous?" asked Two-Gun Tuck, shoving forward. He was gaunt and saturnine, and his iron-gray hair lent a sinister dignity to his hard features.

"My election as sheriff o' these diggin's," said Kooly. "You ain't figurin' on no minority report, are you?"

"I reckon not," said Tuck, and grinned. "You better come over and get your dinero that Quid Bramley left with me."

Mounted on Creed's horse, which Kooly had presented to him, Tony, with his faith restored in fine American sports, and with Maria cuddled behind him, left with Preston.

Later Kooly was called upon by a delegation who presented him with a metal badge. "We took up an ante to build a

hoosegow," a spokeman told him, "and you can set up office over in the *Weekly Banner* outfit. They're gettin' out an extry."

Tuck sent for the new sheriff. "Here's five hundred smackers to meet emergencies," the gambler told him. "More when you need it."

Kooly shoved it back. "There ain't no overhead," he told Tuck. "Prisoners will pay their own board, an' I ain't drawin' no salary."

"Then make that your first month's salary."

Kooly grinned, but there was no mirth in it. "I heard you got a glass jaw," he said guilelessly. "Incidentally, one of the new laws I aim to uphold is to let good women strictly alone, *sabe?*"

"All right, if you want to be a fool," growled Tuck, "but maybe you'll see it my way—even without salary. You came in with Creed's horse, didn't you?"

"That's right. I brought it for a present for Tony. Creed was generous that way."

"You killed Creed!"

"Maybe. I aim always to beat a rattler to the draw. But there's time enough to argue that when you produce the body."

"*Corpus delicti,* eh? Well, I'm a man of thoroughness, Kooly."

"So am I, Two-Gun. Besides, I'm an observin' cuss. Many's the time I've seen emigrants buried in the middle of a trail, so that after a lenthy wagon train had passed, not even a maraudin' Injun could find their graves. It's an old prairie custom."

A WEEK later a ponderous swaggering bully came into Kooly's office, accompanied by Tuck, and announced himself as the duly elected sheriff of all that domain. "What for you hornin' in on my territory, son?" he demanded belligerently of Kooly.

"By minin' law, an unproved claim in limit is jumpable," advised Kooly, and knocked the ashes off his cheroot with the muzzle of his forty-four. "This about the first time you ever showed up here, ain't it?"

"Wal—er—it's a sort o' biggish territory," stammered the self-acclaimed sheriff, who had been nosed out of the draw and was afraid to reach.

"Then you won't miss this little stretch I'm runnin'," said Kooly with a grin.

"Honest, mister, you'll have to vamose," insisted the unhappy intruder. "The whole sov-reign state o' Californy is behind me, an' Dutchman's Luck is a—is a—what was that you called it, Tuck?"

"A political subdivision thereof."

Kooly brightened. "Shucks, that's easy to get aroun'. We'll call a meetin' an' secede. Now, get to hell out o' here!"

They got out.

Kooly had been on the job a month when he happened across Mistress Kent, on the night shift of an all-night restaurant. She was neatly clad in a black dress, with starched white collar and cuffs, and he thought that the combination went well with her blue eyes and dark red hair. She served him without sign of recognition, and he figured she was still mad with him, so he didn't ask about her husband, although the somber hue of her dress led to speculation. Next day he went to the town's growing graveyard and, recognizing the lone, pathetic geranium, decided that Mistress Kent was now a widow.

"Well, ole settler," he addressed the little mound, "six feet o' dirt is better'n a woman on yore mind!" and rode off humming his favorite ditty.

As time went on a spiritual unrest again assailed him. He blamed it at first on his separation from the exciting business of ferrying wagon trains, but there was no lack of excitement in keeping the lid on Dutchman's Luck. Self-blame for poor business foresight was his next excuse. The gratuitous donation of his services as sheriff was costing him good money

as a favored guide. But even this excuse didn't stand up. Quid Bramley, returning, plunked down papers for a paying claim staked for the two of them—and now he had no excuse.

Finally, as the nostalgia became more acute, Kooly admitted the true source of his unrest. He rode over to see Maria. Tony had gone with his boss to haul sluice lumber from the town of Dead Pine. He found her cheerfully set up in a neat little shack.

"Oh, Meester Jed!" she exclaimed, and in her childish joy at seeing him, she kissed him. Again she was in his arms, but she began, in a small, confused voice to plead with him.

"Yeah, I know," he said bitterly. "Remember, please, your husband—Tony! I've tried to remember him, Maria, just like I've tried to forget you."

"You are a very good man, just like Tony is a very good man. I think next to Tony I like you the best of all the world!"

"I'd admire to hear you say it, Maria—that if there'd been no Tony, maybe I—"

Her lips did not answer his unfinished question, but her eyes did. She looked at him long and earnestly, like a grave child. "Oh," she said, at last, "but for your eyes you look so very like my Tony!"

LOWER in spirit than before, he returned to Dutchman's Luck. It was clear to him now that Maria, and not the uplifting of that ribald, benighted community, had been the force that held him, and he was determined that they could look for another sheriff. And, as though fate had arranged it, Tuck met him on the outskirts of the town.

"Kooly," said the gambler pleasantly, "I like you. I admire nerve. It's an ingredient required in both your business and mine. I've been thinking that this is a coming region, and I've bought in on a freight route out of Kansas Post. We needn't worry for a long while about competition from the clippers coming around the Horn, for I hear there are half a thousand of them stranded right now in San Francisco Bay for want of crews. Why not bury the hatchet, and run my route for me? The terms will be right, and there's a bull train heading eastward in the morning. What do you say?"

"That's a lie about likin' me," Kooly said gravely. "But I'll give it a thought, an' let you know tonight."

He went to Tuck's place and got drunk. But the gaiety annoyed him and he went into Tuck's office where it was comparatively quiet. Drawing the curtains on the sleeping alcove he stretched out on the bunk and was soon asleep.

It was evening when he awoke to the sound of voices, that of Tuck, slightly thick from drink, leading the conversation. Tuck was saying, "Kooly's my meat. I'm sending him out in the morning."

"You're smart," said another voice, "turning a troublesome hombre into a profit-maker. But he was easy on your pitch. What's back of it?"

"I want to kill a dog."

"There's no closed season. Why don't you?"

"That dog is his special protégé."

"Oh, you mean Tony with the pretty wife?" said the other voice.

"That Tony struck me with his fist. Me!" exclaimed Tuck.

"So you want to kill him."

"I mean to kill him as soon as Kooly is on his way."

The other voice admonished, "I'd go slowly, Two-Gun. You've waited until law and order has crept in."

Tuck laughed. "They don't deal that out, over in Dead Pine. I can kill him there with no questions asked. He went with Preston yesterday."

They went out, and, a little later, Kooly followed. On his way out he left a message with the bartender. "Tell Tuck," he in-

structed, "that the deal's off. I'm pullin' my freight, tonight."

At his quarters he found Bramley, in for supplies.

"Gimme what dust you've got," said Kooly. "I want to buy an extry hoss."

"Pack?" asked the stolid Bramley, chucking a pouch on the table.

"Saddle."

"So you ain't goin' alone, huh?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Suppose she don't want to go?"

"I reckon I don't *sabe* yore talk, Quid."

"Yes, you do. What about yore friend Tony? He won't last long around here, with you gone. I heard tell Two-Gun's got him marked for cancellation."

"Lay off about Tony. Besides, that's his problem. I got my own!" said Kooly.

"I allow you'll regret it, Jed."

"Get out!" growled Kooly. "When I want yore puny advice, I'll ask for it."

"I'll be glad to accommodate—both ways," said Bramley, and picked up his hat.

LEADING the extra horse, Kooly set out for Preston's claim. As he passed Tuck's place he saw the latter's pony hitched to the rack, and, from the packed saddle bags, decided that the vindictive gambler was losing no time in carrying out his mission of vengeance.

Like a storm doubling on its course, the cloud of alcoholic befuddlement, that had claimed him earlier in the day, again settled upon him. Lurching along in the saddle, with the extra horse hanging back on the reins, he finally arrived at Maria's shack.

There was a candle burning in the window. For Tony, he reckoned. Well, the poor cuss would be needing seven of them soon, so he didn't begrudge him the little beacon. He called Maria by name, so as not to frighten her.

She came to the door, her slim young form wrapped in a shawl. "It is of Tony?" she gasped.

Her quick concern angered him. "Yeah," he growled, "it's about Tony. What would you say, Maria, if I tol' you Tony ain't comin' back?"

"I would pray that I would die, too!"

He hadn't expected that answer, and he was standing there trying to figure out his next move when she slumped to the floor. "Oh, then he is dead!" she said dully, her hands going to her mouth as though to force back the very words that suggested it.

The thing was beyond him now. Knowing that Tuck was a man of his word, and that Tony's doom was sealed, he thought for a moment, and compromised with truth. "Tony is done for," he told her.

(Please continue on page 128)

• • • RANGE OF

By
Bennett Foster

When old Ben Queen asked ex-lawman Lee Braid to do him a favor, he didn't know he was asking Lee to match powdersmoke wits with a gun-boss killer.

RIDDLES • • •

Novelette of a Rustler's Rendezvous

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CHAPTER ONE

Miss Queen

LEE BRAID looked at the new logs of the cabin, at the girl on the porch, then felt again the letter in his pocket. This was the place, he was sure of that. It had to be the right place. It an-

The men faced each other in deadly silence.

swered the description that Ben Queen had given him, but there was something wrong.

Lee Braid couldn't quite put his hands on that something. The girl was pretty—and yet there was something about her, something that didn't show on her face, or in the way she stood or in the way that she looked at Lee Braid, that somehow made pretty not quite the right word. She was troubled—there was something worrying her, something bothering her. On a hunch Lee Braid decided against delivering the letter.

"This is Queen's place, ain't it?" he drawled.

The girl on the porch nodded. "My father is Mr. Queen," she said.

"I'd like to speak to him." Lee's grey eyes crinkled at the corners. Tentatively he tried his slow grin. Sometimes a little show of friendliness went a long way.

"He's busy," the girl answered.

Lee Braid shook his head. "Away?" he asked. "I'm lookin' for a job. Could you use a hand, you reckon?"

"No." The girl turned her head so that her eyes did not encounter Lee's. "We haven't any cattle. We don't need a cowboy."

Lee looked up at the sun. It was sloping down toward the west. He made his face as lugubrious as possible. "I'm sure sorry," he announced. "I been ridin' quite a ways. . . ." He paused expectantly. According to the ethics of the country where Braid came from, the girl should now invite him to stay for supper. He waited hopefully.

The girl on the porch failed to take the hint. Again her black eyes sought Lee's face. Her crisp voice gave directions. "The Jug ranch has a camp about six miles down the creek," she announced. "I'm sure that you'll be welcome there. You can ride it easily in an hour."

Lee Braid grinned to himself. Ben Queen was going to get a kick out of this when Lee made his report. Ben would do a lot of hurrahing. "Yessem," said Lee Braid. "I reckon I'll pull along. Mebbe if I come back when yore father's to home. . . ." Again he paused.

"We don't need any help." The girl used the tone with which a harassed housewife dismisses an importunate agent.

"Molly!" a querulous voice, calling from the interior of the cabin, cut her short. The girl flushed red. She looked hastily at Lee and then turned toward the door.

"Yes?" she answered.

"Who's out there?" called the voice. "Is it Cameron?"

The girl flung a look at Lee Braid, turned and stepped inside the door. Lee could hear her voice but could not distinguish the words. Presently she reappeared, her cheeks colored bright with the blood beneath. "I'm sorry," she announced, "but we don't need a man. Goodbye." Again she turned and almost at a run went through the door.

For a moment after her departure Lee Braid stood stock still. Then, suddenly, he grinned at his own predicament. If he had delivered the letter from Ben Queen he would have been welcome, he was sure of that. But he hadn't delivered the letter. Now, if he should turn it over, he would look like a fool. The girl—Molly the man inside had called her—would think that he was a fresh bumpkin. Lee Braid shrugged. The only thing he could do now was wait until he had a chance to see the man whose voice he had heard and then deliver the letter. That wouldn't be so good either, but it was the best thing he could think of.

SLOWLY he turned from the porch and walked back to his waiting horses. As he mounted his Bill horse he caught the flutter of a curtain inside the cabin. Evidently the girl was watching through the window. Lee settled himself in the saddle, gravely lifted his hat, bowed toward the cabin, and then hazing Blue, his pack

horse, and Brownie, his extra riding horse, started toward the gap in the pole fence.

The horses watered at the creek, sucking thirstily although they had watered when they crossed it before. Lee Braid, knee around his saddlehorn and paper and tobacco between his brown fingers, looked back at the cabin. He had made a fool of himself, he decided, asking for a job. But then this was a fool errand—about as fool an errand as Lee Braid in all his twenty-eight years had ever tried to do. He scratched a match on his saddlehorn, lit his smoke and pulling up Bill's head, started on across the creek.

"If ol' Ben could see that girl he wouldn't think they needed any help down here," Lee told the Bill horse. "Shucks. That girl could look after herself any place." Bill tossed his head and laid back one ear. A companionable sort, the Bill horse, and about as good to talk to as a man. More sense than some men, too, Lee thought, particularly a man named Lee Braid.

Riding on down the creek Blue and Brownie stepping along before him, Lee Braid thought it over. He wished that he had stayed north on the Hondo. Cattle and horses and water and grass and men, too, when it came to that, were easy enough for Lee Braid to understand. Ben Queen had taught Lee a lot in raising him. Two years as a deputy sheriff had taught him a lot more. Then a year with the Stock Association had put on the finishing touches. Of course, when Ben had written, Lee had quit his Association job and gone to see what was wanted. And he hadn't found it in him to refuse when Ben had asked a favor.

"I got a fool brother," Ben had said. "He's been teachin' school back east all his life. Now he's got an idea that he's goin' to write a book about this country. Homesteaded a section apiece an' throwed up a cabin an' all. He wrote me about it. I'm goin' down to see 'em as soon as the hayin's done, but John's got me worried. He's just butted in on a man's place an' took up grass an' water. I'd like for you to go down there, Lee, an' look 'em over. Make 'em a visit. How about it, kid?"

At first Lee had tried to get out of it. Then, when Ben had put on the pressure, the younger man had given in. Ben had written a letter of introduction. Lee had taken his horses and a camp outfit and by easy stages had made the trip of two hundred miles. He had stopped at Buena Vista and talked to his former boss, the Stock Association's secretary. Jack Perrin, the secretary, had wanted Lee to go back to work on a new case that had just come up. Now here Lee was, a week from the Hondo, and the first rattle out of the box, he'd made a fool of himself. Lee Braid put out his cigarette, grinding the butt against his saddlehorn. As he dropped the crumpled paper Blue threw up his head and nickered. An answer came from beyond a rise.

Lee Braid rode over the rise. There, a quarter of a mile ahead, was a cabin, old and weathered. There were corrals behind it, a barn and sheds, and from the horse pasture behind the barn a man was bringing a string of horses toward the corral. This probably was the Jug line camp of which Molly Queen had spoken. Blue nickered again and from the corral where the horses milled came an answer. Lee Braid rode on down.

The rider had penned his horses by the time Lee reached the corral. He dismounted stiffly from his big bay, made his way across the corral and, leaning an arm on the fence, made Lee welcome.

" 'Most sundown," said the rider. "Better unsaddle an' throw yore horses in with these. I'm about to get supper."

Lee Braid grinned. This was the sort of talk that he understood. "Got room?" he asked.

"Plenty." The youngster across the fence pushed back his hat, exposing a mop

of curly blond hair. "Throw yore horses in with the bunch. I'll wrangle in the mornin'." Lee nodded and turned to unpack Blue. By the time he had finished the job the blond boy had three horses in a small pen and had unsaddled his bay. He opened the gate for Lee to put his horse through, closed it again when that was done and opened the gate to the horse pasture. Then, outside the corral, the youngster picked up his saddle and led the way to the saddle shed, Lee following. When they had put up their gear the Jug rider suggested that Lee carry his outfit to the house while he got supper. The two separated and Lee carried his bedding to the house, leaving his pack saddle beside the corral fence. He dumped his bedding on an empty bunk, looked into the kitchen where the blond lad was building a fire, then went out and attacked the wood pile.

RETURNING, his arms loaded with wood, Lee piled his burden in the wood box, went out to the wash bench, washed and returned to the kitchen.

"You can set the table," said the blond boy. "Put about four places around. There'll be a couple more in."

Lee put dishes on the table and the blond boy turned the steak. "I stopped up the creek apiece," offered Lee as he placed knives and forks on the table. "Nice lookin' place up there."

"Queens'," said the blond shortly. "How do you like yore steaks? Well done?"

"Fried through," answered Lee. "I'm kind of lookin' for a job in this country. Anybody hirin'?"

"Nope." The blond shook his head.

"My name's Braid," announced Lee, watching the other.

The blond boy didn't turn his head. "I'm Babe Capes," he said. "I—here's Court an' Deranleau." Horses had arrived outside the house. Capes turned the steak again and then busied himself opening a can of corn.

"Quite a bunch of you ridin' out of here," suggested Lee.

"Just me an' Court." Capes had the can open and was emptying it into a frying pan. "Deranleau ain't here regular."

"Is that Pierre Deranleau?" Lee Braid asked.

Capes glanced sharply at his questioner. "Yeah," he returned, and his voice was cool. "Know him?"

"I know of him," answered Lee Braid.

The whole state knew of Pierre Deranleau. Deranleau, so rumor had it, was a gunman, a hired killer. Twice indicted for murder, he had been freed in each instance when powerful but unknown forces came to his aid. Recently Pierre Deranleau had shot and killed a gambler in Buena Vista. A self-defense plea had freed him although the gambler's friends—and Lee Braid knew some of them—had sworn that Deranleau had incited the quarrel and had drawn first.

"Oh," said Babe Capes, and his voice was friendly again, "Pierre's down here . . . well, he's workin' for ol' York Cameron."

York Cameron owned the Jug Ranch, Lee Braid knew that. Ben Queen had told him so, and besides Lee had heard of Cameron while working as an Association detective. "Who's yore regular pardner?" Braid asked idly.

"Court Cameron, ol' York's kid." Capes was putting the steak on a plate. From outside the house came a splashing as the new arrivals washed themselves. "Pour the coffee, will you?" Capes put the steak on the table.

Lee Braid got the coffee pot from the stove and filled the cups. As he replaced the pot the door opened and two men came in. The first was small, black-haired, black-eyed, moving with a catlike quickness. From descriptions he had heard, Lee Braid recognized Pierre Deranleau. The other was a lanky, tall youngster, about twenty-two or twenty-three, Lee

surmised. His face was flushed as though with anger and he was beginning a sentence as he stepped through the door.

"You got no business—" he said, and then stopped short, seeing Braid.

Deranleau had stopped inside the door and was looking Lee over with hard, bright eyes. Deranleau wore a suit, a neat gray coat and trousers. His hat, a stockman's Stetson, was pushed back on his head and he held the left lapel of his coat with his left hand. There was a gun under his left arm, Lee Braid knew, although he could not see the weapon. Lee returned Deranleau's stare, his own grey eyes narrowing a trifle. He wasn't at all afraid of Deranleau. Lee Braid had met some hard ones himself and hadn't come off second best. Still his own gun, snugged down under his left arm, felt good. It was odd, the thought flashed into Lee's mind, that both he and Deranleau should carry their weapons in an identical manner.

"Who's this?" snapped Deranleau in an authoritative voice.

Babe Capes barely turned his head. "Lee Braid," he said. "He's lookin' for a job. Braid, this is Pierre Deranleau, an' that tall fellow's Court Cameron."

Deranleau nodded and removed his hand from the lapel of his coat. Cameron walked across and shook hands with Braid.

"Reckon there's any work around here?" asked Braid.

He spoke to Cameron but Deranleau answered the question. "No," he said shortly.

Lee Braid watched to see the impression his words made. Deranleau eyed him sharply.

The four men sat down at the table. Deranleau helped himself to the steak, did not pass it but let the others reach. They ate in silence. When the meal was finished Deranleau got up, looked at Court Cameron and jerked his head toward the door. "I want to talk to you," he said, and without waiting for Court's answer, walked out. Cameron sat for a moment, his face flushing red, then arose and followed the smaller man. When the two were gone Capes got up. Babe Capes, like Court Caferon, was flushed.

"Let's wash the dishes," he suggested.

Lee Braid helped Capes with the dish washing. Halfway through Capes paused and lit the lamp. When they had finished and hung up their dish towels, Lee rolled a cigarette.

"Nice fellow," he said casually.

"He's a damn' son. . ." growled Capes.

Lee lit his smoke. "Got a cribbage board?" he asked. "I kind of fancy myself at cribbage."

Capes picked up the dishpan, went to the door, and, opening it, threw out the dishwater. "I'll take you on," he replied, turning from the door and kicking his foot against it. The door swung but did not latch. Capes crossed the room and took a cribbage board and a deck of cards from the shelf. The door swung open. Lee crossed to close it and as he reached the door, heard voices. Court Cameron's voice came clearly.

"You stay away from Queens'." There was anger in Cameron's voice. Deranleau said something that Lee didn't catch. Court Cameron spoke again. "I won't do it," he said. "Go tell the old man. I'm through."

There should have been finality in the statement, but there was not. In spite of the words the voice lacked force. Lee Braid closed the door and went back to the table where Capes was setting up the cribbage board.

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Boss of Humbug Valley

THE two were well along with the first game when Deranleau and Cameron came in. Court threw his hat at a chair, missed it, and letting the hat

lie on the floor, walked across to the dark bedroom. Deranleau came across to the table and stood watching the game. Lee counted his hand, pegged what he had made, and picked up the crib.

Deranleau spoke. "You'll pull along in the mornin'," he said. It was not a question, but rather a flat statement, an order.

Lee looked up from the four cards he had spread out before him. "Mebbe," he drawled. "I'm lookin' for a job, you know. Thought I'd ride up the creek. . ."

"You'll pull along." This time Deranleau made the order apparent. "They don't need you up the creek or in this country. There's too many drifters." He turned away from the table, walked toward the room where Court Cameron had retired, stopped and looking back over his shoulder, spoke again.

"An' don't sit up all night. I want to get some sleep." The bedroom door closed behind him.

Lee Braid counted the crib, pegged his fifteen-four, and Babe Capes gathered the cards to shuffle. His face was white with anger.

"The damn'—" began Capes, and then stopped. "You don't want to take it hard," he apologized after a moment. "He's just . . .well, he's just. . . ."

"He's just tellin' me to pull along in the mornin'," said Braid calmly. "Mebbe I'll go." He cut the cards and Babe picked them up to begin a deal.

"There's trouble in the country." Babe Capes seemed to think that some explanation was incumbent upon him, some softening of Deranleau's discourtesy. "There's been some Forty-Four heifers stole an' a bunch of Jug steers was run off. Ol' York's. . . ."

"Forty-Four?" interrupted Lee, raising his eyebrows. "I thought that Cameron branded a Jug."

"He does, but the Forty-Four is Court's brand."

"Does Court Cameron have some cattle of his own?" Lee laid the cards aside.

"York's branded heifer calves for Court ever since he was ten years old." Babe Capes picked up the cribbage board, plainly ending the game. "Court's mother had that brand an' when she died York give it to the boy."

"Hm-m-m-m." Lee Braid was revising his opinion of York Cameron. "Kind of nice. I reckon Cameron must be all right, treatin' his kid that way."

Capes snorted. "Nice!" The word was an expletive. "He treats Court like a damn' hound! He brands cattle for him, all right, but York runs 'em an' sells em. Court makes a full hand but he ain't even on the payroll."

The door of the bedroom opened and Pierre Deranleau spoke smoothly.

"You gents goin' to play all night or are you comin' to bed?" The door closed again.

Capes put the cribbage board on the table. "Might as well go to bed, I reckon," he said lamely.

The four were up by sunrise the next morning. Court Cameron cooked breakfast while Capes wrangled horses. They ate the meal, and Lee deliberately took his time helping with the dishes. Deranleau sat in the kitchen smoking, one cigarette following the next. Braid, covertly watching, noted that he rolled his smokes short, folding back a small piece of the brown paper so that when the cigarette was finished the folded end made a mouth piece. When the dishes were done Deranleau rose from his chair and spoke decisively to Braid.

"This is Little Humbug Creek," he said. "You follow it an' you'll strike the Big Humbug. Cameron's ranch is about ten miles below the gate."

Lee Braid's eyes were narrow and faintly amused. "Thanks," he said dryly.

"An' don't forget to check at the gate," Deranleau warned.

"Would you mind wipin' my nose for

me?" queried Braid. "Seems like I'm kind of helpless this mornin'."

Deranleau, who had turned away, whirled back, his hand stabbing up toward his armpit. Braid faced him nonchalantly. Deranleau stopped his motion. Braid's hand was at his throat. Apparently he was adjusting his neckerchief. His cool grey eyes were on Deranleau's face.

"You know who I am?" snapped the swarthy little man. "I'm Pierre Deranleau."

"Oh," drawled Braid, "I thought mebbe you was Bat Masterson."

For a moment black eyes and grey eyes clashed. Then Deranleau turned away again.

LEE waited. Babe Capes looked at Lee, looked at the door, nodded, and went out. Braid could see Capes outside. Capes nodded his head once more and Lee went out, sure that the way was clear.

At the corral he roped out Blue, saddled and packed the horse, and then roped Brownie and saddled. Then he walked over to Capes and gave his thanks for the hospitality.

He rode for two miles, crossing the creek three times in that distance. On the third crossing he found a little bunch of cattle watering at the creek. Taking the worn path that the cattle had made in the creek bank, Lee rode up it, followed along a short distance and then struck north. He knew that the cattle, leaving the creek, would effectually obliterate his tracks. There were low hills north of the creek. Lee entered them and then swinging his little caravan, started back toward the east. He worked back for a mile or more, tied Blue to a cedar, took a pair of field glasses from his saddle pocket and working his way to the top of the ridge, lay down and looked back at the Jug line camp.

There was no one in sight at the line camp, but as Lee watched he saw Deranleau riding back toward the house along the creek. Evidently Deranleau had followed a short distance to see if Braid was really headed out. Braid watched until Deranleau reached the house, then went back to his horses and resumed his progress, staying behind the ridge. It was, Lee decided, time to deliver his letter to John Queen. He would do that whether it made him look foolish or not. The presence of Pierre Deranleau had decided Lee. There had been too many men killed in countries where Pierre Deranleau had been, too many men found lying outside their homes with a rifle slug through them. Maybe John Queen would be found so, and if he were, how would Lee Braid answer to Ben Queen?

Where the hills sloped down into the canyon where Little Humbug Creek ran its course, Lee Braid checked again. Once more he dismounted and went to a vantage point. Through his glasses the new logs of Queen's cabin were white and distinct. It was almost as though Lee Braid were standing in the yard in front of the cabin. There was a horse with a flat saddle before the house and as Braid watched, a bareheaded man came from the cabin door and descended the porch steps, his arm around the shoulders of Molly Queen. The man was elderly and his hair was white.

The white-haired man mounted the horse, after he had kissed the girl, leaned from his saddle to kiss her again, and then turning the horse rode at a bouncing trot down the creek. Lee watched him go. The rider had hardly disappeared behind the willow thickets that lined the creek before another rider came to Queen's cabin. The second rider had evidently been waiting for John Queen's departure. Through the glasses Lee recognized Court Cameron. He saw Court dismount and stride toward the girl who still remained in the yard. He saw Court put his arms around Molly Queen. Lee lowered the glasses. For some unaccountable reason he didn't want to see Court Cameron kiss Molly Queen. If he

had held the binoculars to his eyes but a moment longer Lee might have seen Molly Queen twist out of that embrace, but Lee did not keep the glasses to his eyes. Instead he went back to where Blue and Brownie patiently waited, cropping grass. It was his business to intercept John Queen and deliver his letter. He started Blue and Bill along.

AS HE worked over the ridge, intent on finding a path to the creek bottom and confronting John Queen, Lee looked at the hills across the canyon. A movement caught his eyes. Lee reached back for the glasses. The focus was poor but Lee caught a glimpse of a bay horse across the canyon. Most riders rode bay horses. Lee twisted the screw of the glasses. A metallic glint on the hill drew his attention. Then sweeping the canyon he saw John Queen riding along the creek. Queen's horse was walking slowly. He watched John Queen; a flash across the canyon as from a rifle barrel; and a bay horse that was switching his tail at flies. Lee Braid thrust the glasses in the front of his shirt and his hand sought the butt of the rifle that was in a scabbard under his right leg. The rifle was in his hands as he slid down from Brownie.

Lee Braid carried a Sharps. Ben Queen had given him the gun when Lee was twelve years old. It was a .45 caliber. There was a vernier sight on the tang. Lee Braid lay down. He pushed the Sharps out in front of him and raised the vernier sight.

It was eight hundred yards across the canyon and the bay horse was still switching at flies. On the hillside below the bay was a cluster of white rocks and a cedar tree. The Buffalo Sharps bellowed. Lee waited. After what seemed a long time one of the white rocks jumped and dust flew up. Lee, with another shell in the Sharps, peered through the vernier again. A man came out from behind the white rocks, running toward the horse. The Buffalo Sharps threw dirt over the running man's boots. There wasn't time to raise the vernier sight further. The running man hit the bay horse and threw himself into the saddle. The bay horse scrambled up the hill and disappeared into a cluster of cedars.

Lee Braid looked down at the creek. John Queen had stopped and was peering up at the side hill, his hand lifted to shade his eyes.

Lee slid another shell in the Sharps, figuring that he might as well enforce a lesson. The slug from the Sharps splashed water in the creek in front of John Queen. Queen took the hint. He turned his horse and rode back up the creek at a lope.

Lee waited a while. He scanned the hills across the canyon with his glasses. He saw nothing but cedars and rocks and three cows that were grazing along the hillside. After a time he got to his feet. He caught Brownie and put the rifle back in its scabbard and the glasses in a saddle pocket. He picked up Blue and Bill and rode down the hill.

He left Blue and Bill in the creek bottom and rode Brownie up the side hill to the white rocks and the cedar. Lee Braid dismounted. Looking down behind the rocks he saw a roll of brown paper and a cigarette butt. Lee picked it up. The paper of the cigarette had been folded back, forming a mouthpiece. Lee dropped the cigarette stub. His back was cold and the muscles at the back of his neck were hard. Lee crawled back onto Brownie and rode down the hill. In the canyon bottom he turned Blue and Bill southwest and followed down the creek.

It was about eleven o'clock when Lee Braid rode into the Jug Ranch. The Jug was big. It spread out over a great deal of ground, what with the big house, the bunkhouse, the barns, stock yards and corrals. Lee found a man at one of the corrals.

"Where's York Cameron?" Lee asked.

THE rider said that Cameron was at the house. He started to tell Lee that there was no use in seeing Cameron, that Cameron wasn't taking on hands, but Lee Braid had turned Brownie and was riding toward the house.

He had seen that Cameron was on the porch. Lee had no trouble in recognizing him. Cameron was an old man but he sat straight in his chair and he had fierce yellowish eyes and a great beak of a nose. Cameron was talking to another man, a square-faced fellow who stood, hat in hand. Cameron was giving the other man a raking over.

"Yo're supposed to know cows, Buckles," Cameron was saying as Lee rode up. "I call you my foreman but. . . ." Cameron stopped. Lee dismounted from Brownie before the house and came up the steps. His boot heels were loud against the wood. Lee stopped and looked at Cameron.

"What in hell do you want?" snapped Cameron, raking the younger man with his fierce eyes.

"I come to give you a little advice," drawled Lee Braid. "Lay off of John Queen."

Cameron came up out of his chair. "What the hell. . . ." he began. "Who are you?"

Lee Braid answered that question, too. "I'm a man that packs a gun," he said thinly. "I come from the Hondo. From Ben Queen's. If anythin' should happen to John Queen I'm goin' to take it personal." He turned and stumped down the steps.

Old York Cameron was speechless. He followed Lee Braid with his yellow eyes. As Braid mounted his horse Cameron got his breath.

"Come back here!" he shouted. "Come back here!"

Lee had turned Brownie. He didn't even look back over his shoulder as he rode out of the yard.

CHAPTER THREE

A Job for Lee

RIDING up Humbug Creek, Lee came to the junction of Big and Little Humbug. He debated for a moment and then turned his horse north and followed Little Humbug. He rode along steadily, trot, walk, and trot again. Below the Jug camp he circled out as he had done in the morning. The sun was in the west now. Lee Braid had eaten nothing since breakfast, but he didn't feel any hunger, didn't intend to stop. He took to the hills, following the high places, circled until he was above Queen's cabin, and then, having made a reconnaissance, rode down and came in on Queen's from the rear. He stopped behind the cabin, hesitated a moment, debating, and then walked toward the back door. He knocked.

There was a long wait and Lee was on the point of knocking again when the door opened. John Queen stood in the doorway. John Queen looked like a scholarly edition of Ben Queen. Where Ben was hard, brown and weathered, John was pale and soft from indoor living. But John Queen's eyes were as blue as Ben's behind his glasses and there was the same curve to John Queen's lips that Ben had. Lee Braid reached for his letter and John Queen spoke.

"Are you looking for work?" asked John Queen.

Lee lowered his hand. "Yes," he answered. "Could you use a rider?"

John Queen smiled faintly. "I'm beginning to think I can," he said slowly. "I haven't any cattle but there might be other things that you could do."

"Yes, sir," said Lee Braid. "I can cook."

That was lost on John Queen. He was looking at Lee's face. "Weren't you here yesterday?" he asked.

Lee flushed. He didn't know why, but the color came into his cheeks. "Yes, sir," he said again.

John Queen spoke gently. "I'm sorry," he said. "You see, I'm writing a book. I was busy when you came. I'm sorry I didn't see you."

"Why," Lee's voice was embarrassed, "that's all right, Mr. Queen. I just come along. . . ."

John Queen interrupted. "Can you build fence?" he asked.

Lee nodded. He didn't like to build fence, but he would if he had to.

"We're going to need some fencing done," said John Queen absently. His eyes were going over Lee, scanning him from top to bottom. "Are you—ah—familiar with the idioms of the country?"

"What?" said Lee.

"I mean, do you know what a cowboy means, for instance, when he calls a man. . ." Queen stopped to think of the phrase, "a damned granger?"

"Sure," said Lee. "He means a damn' nester."

Queen's eyebrows lifted. "I see," he said. "Are you conversant with the brands and earmarkings?"

"I've read 'em,' answered Lee, wondering where all this was leading.

"Then," Queen seemed to have settled a question in his mind, "I'll hire you. You can help me with my book."

"Oh," said Lee.

"I'll pay you. . . ."

"Thirty a month an' keep is usual wages," interposed Lee. "When should I start, Mr. Queen?"

"Why, right now," John Queen answered. "Ah . . . now!" He turned as though to go back into the house, his eyes absent, his mind evidently turned to inner things. He took a step, stopped, and looked back at Lee Braid.

"By the way," said John Queen, "what is your name?"

"Lee Braid."

"Braid . . . Braid. . . ." Queen repeated the name.

"That's my name," said Lee, gently. The way to handle crazy people was to humor them, he had heard, and this gentle old man was certainly crazy.

"I see," said John Queen. "Braid. That is your name." His eyes grew blank again and once more he turned to the door. Lee Braid stood watching Queen go. John Queen did not look back but disappeared through the door. Lee scratched his head, pushing back his hat to do so, exposing his thatch of rusty hair. If this was a sample of John Queen, then Ben had certainly been right. John needed looking after. Then, pulling his hat back down into place, Lee Braid walked back to where Brownie and Bill and Blue waited.

"Bill," said Lee Braid, "this is a nutty job." Bill, who was standing on three legs, shifted his weight and sighed.

THERE was no horse pasture, Lee found, when he investigated. He hobbled Blue and turned the three horses loose. Bill might be the conversationalist of the three, but Blue was the boss. Lee knew that Brownie and Bill would stay with Blue. Freed from their loads, the horses rolled. Then, with Blue hobbling along in front, they made for the creek. Lee carried his bedding, his saddle, and his packs to the shed. There was a room in the shed, evidently built for a saddle room. Lee took possession. He spread out his bed, arranged his belongings and then went out again. The horses were in the creek bottom, working on the grass. They wouldn't go far. Lee, having located the horses, wondered about his new domain. He would keep a horse up every night, he decided. He would build a horse pasture, too. That was the first thing to do. There was a wood pile and an ax. Lee busied himself at the wood pile.

After he had chopped for an hour he decided that he had enough wood. He

wondered what else there was to do.

He found a wagon behind the shed that needed grease. Lee found some logs of the right length and got the back axle of the wagon lifted. He couldn't find a wagon wrench in the shed and deciding that it must be at the house, went to get it. As he crossed the back porch the door opened and John Queen emerged.

"Ah . . how do you do?" said John Queen.

"I'm pretty good," said Lee. "Have you got a wagon wrench in the house?"

John Queen pondered the question. Finally he shook his head. "I'm sure we haven't," he said.

"Got to be someplace," said Lee Braid. "That's a new wagon."

"Yes," John Queen nodded. "I bought it."

Lee had some more questions. "How do you keep yore horses?" he asked.

"No," Queen answered, studying Lee again. "We haven't a pasture. Mr. Cameron, the young Mr. Cameron, has been bringing in the horses." Queen forestalled Lee's question. "That is, until today. I forbade him the place yesterday."

"What?" said Lee.

"His father is very unfriendly." Apparently Queen felt that his new employee was entitled to some explanation.

"I see," said Lee.

"Yes . . ." John Queen had seated himself on the steps of the porch. "What was it you wanted?"

"I got to have a wagon wrench," Lee explained patiently. "I got to grease the wagon."

"Why?"

"Because," Lee was still patient, "I'm goin' to have to haul poles to build a fence for a horse pasture."

"Certainly," said John Queen, and got up from the steps and went into the house again.

Lee waited. Maybe, he thought, Queen had gone to get a wrench. John Queen did not return, and after a while Lee gave up waiting and went back to the shed. After an hour's search, he found the wagon wrench stuck up under the eaves of the shed. Another half hour failed to disclose the whereabouts of the axle grease. Lee debated about asking Queen but decided against going to him. There was no use in asking Queen anything. He stood outside the shed and looked at the house. The sun was sliding down hill behind the house and there was no smoke coming from the chimney. The axle grease would have to wait until morning, Lee decided. It was time to get supper.

He went to the house, carrying in wood from the pile he had cut. He built a fire in the stove and set about getting supper. There was a quantity of canned stuff and a quarter of beef in the meat safe. The meat had come from Court Cameron, Lee decided. He cut steaks, peeled potatoes, made biscuits and put on a pot of coffee. While he worked John Queen appeared, stared absently at the activity in the kitchen and then disappeared again.

LEE had just put on the steaks when he heard horses outside. He went to the door and looked out. Molly Queen had dismounted behind the house and was standing, holding her horse's reins. She was looking up, talking to a man who still sat his horse. Lee could scarcely believe his eyes. The man was Pierre Deranleau. As he watched, Deranleau slipped down from his horse, stepped across and took hold of Molly's arm. Molly Queen jerked away and Deranleau, taking another smooth step, caught her arm again. The girl twisted but could not break the hold.

Lee Braid pulled off the flour sack apron he had donned, threw it at a chair, and went out the door. He walked up behind Deranleau, his boots making no sound

on the soft earth. Lee Braid still wore his coat and he had his hand under the left side. The walnut grip of the gun was smooth in that hand. Molly Queen saw him coming. Her eyes widened and she ceased her struggling.

Pierre Deranleau was talking. "Suppose I tell Cameron about you and Court?" he said, his voice smooth. "Suppose I did? Think your father would last a day? Suppose . . ."

"Suppose you let the girl go," said Lee Braid. His gun was out now, held just in front of his chest, not pointing anywhere in particular, just there.

Deranleau released his hold on Molly Queen's arm. He whirled around, his hand going up toward his chest. He saw Lee Braid as he turned, and stopped the movement of his hand. Molly Queen had jumped back. Her face was flushed with anger. Pierre Deranleau was no fool. He saw the gun in Braid's hand and he saw the rage in Braid's eyes.

"Get out!" said Lee Braid. "Get out, an' don't come back."

"So you didn't go?" Deranleau put a wealth of menace into the question. "You had to come back an' hang around?"

"I didn't go," answered Lee Braid heavily. "I'm here an' I'll be around, Deranleau."

Deranleau's eyes were as narrow as Braid's own. "You got the drop," he said.

"An' I'll keep it." Braid's voice was expressionless. "Get out, Deranleau!"

"I'll remember you." Deranleau snarled the words. "Don't think I'll forget you!"

"I don't want you to," Braid answered Deranleau's snarl evenly.

"Braid's yore name," Deranleau was still snarling.

"Braid's the name," agreed Lee. "If you want to know anythin' more about me, ask Shorty Deinst."

Deranleau's eyes widened a trifle. Shorty Deinst had killed three men and terrorized Buena Vista three years before. Shorty Deinst had borne a reputation as a hard one.

"Deinst's in hell!" snapped Deranleau. "He was killed . . ." Deranleau's eyes opened wider. He had just recalled how Shorty Deinst had died. A deputy sheriff named Braid had killed Deinst in the street in Buena Vista, killed him after Deinst had his gun out and it was smoking.

"That's where you'll ask him about me," said Lee Braid, evenly. "For the last time, get out, Deranleau."

CHAPTER FOUR

Bushwhack Trail

DERANLEAU walked over to his horse. He took the reins, twisted out a stirrup and mounted. Lee Braid watched him. Deranleau turned his horse and rode away down the creek. He didn't look back. When Deranleau was three hundred yards away Lee Braid let go a long breath and put his Colt back under his arm. He turned toward the house and Molly Queen stood before him.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Yore dad hired me," said Lee Braid. "I found him at home."

"You had a gun in your hand," accused the girl.

"It's a good place to have one, sometimes," said Lee Braid. "I'd just put on the steak. I reckon it's burned." He stepped past the girl and walked to the house. At the kitchen door he stopped. John Queen, flour sack about his waist, was turning the meat. Lee stepped inside the door and Molly Queen, head high, walked past him.

"Ah . . ." said John Queen, looking up from his occupation, "this meat seems to be almost done."

Lee Braid walked across the kitchen and took the fork from John Queen's

hand. He tested the steak. "Just about," he agreed gravely.

"Will you take care of my horse?" asked Molly Queen behind him.

Lee went out and looked after the horse. He unsaddled the animal and turned him loose, sure that he would find the other horses in the creek bed. When he went back to the house there were three places set at the kitchen table and the meal had been taken up from the stove. Lee Braid sat down and ate with the Queens.

John Queen was preoccupied during the meal. Indeed Lee believed that John Queen was always preoccupied. Molly Queen, too, was silent. Now and again when Lee lifted his eyes suddenly, he caught the girl watching him. Lee Braid minded his table manners.

When the meal was finished John Queen broke his silence. He smiled at Molly, nodded his white head, and made a startling announcement. "I was shot at today," said John Queen.

Molly's quick gasp was more eloquent than words could possibly have been.

"Three shots," Queen continued, seeming to enjoy the effect he was creating upon his daughter. "It was very odd. Only one of the shots came at all near me. The third shot. It splashed water in the creek. It seemed as though it were a warning." Queen arose, looked at Molly and then at Lee, and apparently finished with his announcement, smiled again.

"You will excuse me, my dear?" he asked, and without waiting for an answer strolled from the kitchen. Presently Lee Braid heard a match scratch against something.

Molly Queen was looking at Lee. Lee, turning his head from her searching eyes, spoke casually. "If it was me," he said, "I'd see that the curtains was down in the room where he works."

Molly jumped up from the chair and hurried from the kitchen. When she returned, Lee had the dishes stacked and was pouring water into the dishpan. He nodded to the girl, put the tea kettle back on the stove, and carried the stacked dishes from the table. "You know where the axle grease is?" asked Lee as he put the dishes in the pan.

Molly gasped again. "It's under the porch," she said. "What . . . who shot at father?"

"I ain't sure," said Lee. "Under the porch, huh? Now why didn't I look there?"

"You know who shot at father," the girl accused. "I watched your eyes. I'm going to get father and have him make you go. I'm going to. . . ." Her voice broke.

"Easy," admonished Lee. "Yore dad was ridin' down the creek and there was a man on the hill across. I didn't like him there so I shot a couple of times. Then I dropped one in the creek. I kind of wanted yore dad to know it wasn't healthy ridin' around alone."

Molly Queen said, "Oh," her voice small. She looked at Lee Braid. Lee was swabbing dishes in the pan. "Who are you?" demanded Molly Queen.

"Lee Braid," the man answered soberly.

"But what are you doing here? Where do you come from? What are you going to do?"

"Yore dad hired me for general flunkey," answered Lee. "I come from up north apiece an' tomorrow I'm going to start in gettin' poles for a horse pasture. An' that makes me think. If you'd dry these dishes I could go get Bill out of the creek and put him in the corral."

"But—" began Molly Queen.

Lee laid aside the dish cloth. He carried the dishpan to the door, emptied its contents, and putting down the pan disappeared into the gloom of the dusk.

"Well!" said Molly Queen.

She turned and walking across the kitchen, stopped suddenly. There was a white square on the floor. Molly Queen

picked up the envelope and looked at the name and address written on it. One long, slender finger lifted the unsealed flap. Molly pulled out the letter and as she read a smile widened her warm, generous mouth. Refolding the letter from her Uncle Ben she tucked it into her bodice. She knew now just who Lee Braid was.

LEE BRAID did not go back to the Queens' cabin. He caught the pampered Bill, who was disappointed when there was no bread and salt forthcoming, and put the horse in the corral. When that was done Lee went to the room in the shed, sat and smoked a cigarette, and then went to bed.

He was up early the next morning. He saddled Bill and left the cabin, riding west. The presence of a wagon at the cabin predicated the possession of a work team, and Let wanted that team. Riding along the creek, for he knew that the horses would not be far from water, Lee considered the things there were to do. He had an enemy in Pierre Deranleau and another in York Cameron. Lee had served notice on York Cameron to let John Queen alone, and he had also told Deranleau to get off the Queens' property. Neither of the two was going to take kindly to that sort of treatment. Lee wondered what his next move should be. He lifted his hand and felt in the inner pocket of the coat. His eyes widened. His letter from old Ben Queen was gone! Lee shrugged. After all, what did it matter. He had a job with John Queen, and a letter from her uncle, no matter how flattering, wouldn't matter at all to Molly.

Lee failed to find the horses along the north fork of the Little Humbug and so, having been out an hour from the cabin, swung east, intending to cross the ridges and come into the east fork of the stream. He would follow down that and if he didn't find the horses there, return to the cabin, eat breakfast, and decide what to do. Maybe, the thought struck him, Molly Queen would know where the horses were. He had been foolish not to ask the girl.

There was not much distance between the forks of Little Humbug Creek and it did not take Lee long to cross. As he rode down the side hill and reached the stream bed, he stopped. There were cattle tracks along the creek, and covering one of the cow tracks and almost obliterating it, was the mark of a shod horse. It looked to Lee Braid as though someone had moved a bunch of cattle along the West Fork.

Tracing cattle was not Lee's business. Still, there might be horses up the stream and Lee turned Bill and rode to investigate. He did not stick to the creek bottom. In a hostile country that would have been foolish. Instead Lee crossed the creek and took to the hills on the east side. About a mile above the spot where he had struck the creek, Lee saw a horseman. He rode down toward the other rider, intending to ask the man if he had seen stray horses, and thus shorten his search. As he approached, the rider turned, saw Lee and wheeled his horse. Lee rode on up.

He recognized the other man as he came closer, and wondered what Nolly Gesche was doing in this country. Nolly Gesche had been the first man that Lee had arrested when he went to work for the Stock Association. From that arrest Gesche had received a year's sentence for cattle stealing. Lee rode up and stopped, his hand caressing the lapel of his coat. He didn't know just how Gesche would react to the meeting.

"Hello, Nolly," he greeted.

"Hello, Braid," answered Gesche. He tried to make his voice hearty, but there was a false ring in it. Nolly Gesche was not a hard man, nor had he been a very successful rustler. He had had good connections and that was all.

"Livin' in this country?" asked Lee, eyeing Gesche.

"Over in Ringate Hole," answered Gesche. "What you doin' up here, Braid?"

"Lookin' after business," answered Lee.

"The Jug been losin' cattle?" Gesche asked innocently—a little too innocently, Lee thought. Nolly Gesche was a weak one. Lee put on the pressure.

"Mebbe you could tell me that, Nolly," he drawled.

"What would I know about it?" Gesche was the picture of injured innocence. "I got a little place over in the Hole. I been there since I—"

"Since you got out of the pen." Lee's voice was flat. "How about it, Nolly? Still got the same friends you had?"

Gesche whitened. "Now listen, Braid," he began. "I'm just as straight as a string, I am. I had a right to handle all the cattle I—"

"Then you have been handlin' cattle." Lee kept his voice hard and level. "I reckon a year didn't help you, Nolly. Mebbe we'd better go in to town an'. . . ."

"I got a bill of sale for every cow I sold." Gesche was desperate. "Court Cameron owns the Forty-Four! I reckon he's got a right to sell his own cattle!"

LEE BRAID'S mind was a turmoil. He had stumbled onto something here, something that he didn't know a lot about. He took another shot in the dark.

"But what about Jugs?" he asked softly. "Got a bill of sale for them too?"

"I ain't never handled any Jugs!" Nolly Gesche was trying as hard as he could to make this stern-faced young fellow believe him. "I don't know nothin' about Jug cattle. Deranleau—" He stopped. Nolly Gesche knew he had said too much.

"Deranleau, huh?" drawled Lee. "So he's the man?"

"I met him in the pen," Gesche said.

"An' you been workin' for him since you got out," completed Lee Braid. "Nolly, we better go to town."

"I ain't handled any cattle for him," said Gesche feverishly. "I told him about Court Cameron handlin' some Forty-Fours through me, but I ain't handled none for Pierre. I don't know where he takes 'em. Don't take me in. I just got married. The wife's got—we're goin' to have a kid. Don't take me to town. I had a right to sell the cattle for Court. I—"

"Nolly," said Lee Braid slowly, "you turn yore horse around an' you head for home. I got nothin' to say about Court Cameron sellin' his own stuff. I don't think you been handlin' any Jugs. You go home an' you stay home. But if I hear that you say you seen me or talked to me, if Pierre Deranleau gets word of it, I'll come an' get you and you'll stay in the pen until you rot!"

"You mean—" began Gesche.

"I mean for you to go home an' not talk!" snapped Braid.

"Then you . . . you ain't goin' to take me in?" Gesche could scarcely believe his good fortune. "You ain't—"

"No," said Lee Braid. "What were you ridin' for, so early, Nolly?"

Gesche's eyes lowered. "I heard where I could sell some heifers," he said sullenly. "I was goin' to the Jug line camp to see Court."

Braid shrugged. It was none of his business what Court Cameron did with his cattle.

"Then go on," he said.

Nolly Gesche shook his head. "I'm goin' home," he announced definitely. "I . . . well, hell, Braid . . . thanks.

Lee shrugged again. "You got nothin' to thank me for," he replied. "Give the missus my best, Nolly."

Having stifled Nolly's attempts at expressing gratitude, he watched the man ride away. It was a tough life, that of

an officer, Lee Braid thought. It made every man suspicious of you and you suspicious of every man. When Gesche had gone Lee turned Bill and started back down the creek toward Queens', his errand forgotten.

Lee thought things over as he rode. Some of it was amusing. It was funny, for example, that Court Cameron should steal his own cattle and sell them through an ex-rustler. It was tough, too, on Court to have to do that. If York Cameron had treated his son as a son should be treated, Court would not be forced to such extremes. Lee got a sort of kick out of thinking how the kid was putting it over on the old man! But he didn't get a kick out of the ramifications of Court's activity.

Pierre Deranleau was in the country because Court Cameron was stealing his own cattle. At least that was part of the reason for Deranleau's presence. The rest of the reason was John Queen. And Court was stealing his own cattle because he was in love with Molly Queen. Lee remembered that embrace he had seen through his glasses.

MOLLY QUEEN must be in love with Court, too. And Deranleau was stealing Jug steers—stealing them while he worked for York Cameron. And Deranleau wanted Molly Queen. Lee knew that. He had ordered Deranleau off the Queen place, and he knew. He was positive that Deranleau must be aware of Court's activity. A lot of men must know about that; Babe Capes, for example, and that square-faced old fellow that had been on Cameron's porch—Buckles, Cameron had called him. They were all keeping it dark from York Cameron. Lee wondered why Deranleau hadn't reported Court. The only answer was that Deranleau was playing Court, making use of the boy in his own operations.

There was something behind that. Lee wondered what it was. He felt a little sorry for York Cameron. Of course York had brought this on himself, but it was a little hard on him, having Deranleau double-cross him, and his own son so afraid of him that he would steal cattle, his own cattle, rather than go to his father.

Queens' cabin appeared in the bend of the creek. There was smoke coming from the chimney. Molly Queen was getting breakfast. Lee Braid stopped Bill and reached for papers and tobacco.

Court Cameron loved Molly Queen and she loved Court Cameron. Lee Braid twisted his cigarette into shape. All right, he, Lee Braid would throw in with this. He'd help Molly Queen get what she wanted, and that, as far as Lee was concerned, was that.

CHAPTER FIVE

Guns for an Oldster

HE CAME into the yard from the rear of the cabin. Stopping Bill, he dismounted and let the reins drop. Breakfast ought to be ready and Lee was certainly ready for breakfast. He remembered now what had sent him riding so early. He would have to ask Molly Queen where the horses generally hung around and then go pick them up. Of all the haphazard outfits that Lee had ever encountered, this was the worst.

Starting toward the back porch he heard voices, angry voices. Lee hesitated a moment and then started around the cabin. When he reached the front he stopped. There were mounted men in the yard, Court Cameron hovering in the rear. Buckles and Capes and old York Cameron and Pierre Deranleau were also there. Confronting these men was Molly Queen, an angry Molly Queen with her hair disheveled and head thrown back, and her eyes flaming. Old York was talking and Lee, leaning his left shoulder against the cabin, watched the scene.

"They come through here," York Cameron stormed. "They must have come through here. Twenty-five Jug steers! I think you've had something to do with it. Your old man come in here an' settled on my grass an' water. That's a steal if there ever was one. He done it so that he could rustle my cattle. Yo're as bad as he is!"

"Where's the man that's workin' for you?" Deranleau put in, before Molly could speak. "Where is he?"

Lee Braid took a hand in the conversation. "Right here," he drawled. "Were you lookin' for me?"

The mounted men turned to face Lee. Deranleau's face was dark with anger. York Cameron jerked his head around so that he looked at Braid.

"What you doin' here?" demanded York Cameron. "Yo're the gent that come up talkin' so big to me!"

"An' I'll back my talk!" snapped Braid. "Deranleau, I told you to get off this place last night. I forgot to tell you to stay off, but I'll tell you now. Cameron, if yo're lookin' for steers I'll tell you that there's cattle tracks covered by horse tracks up the east fork. Mebbe yore steers went that way."

"You know a lot about it," blustered Cameron. "Mebbe the horses' tracks was yores."

Lee Braid straightened from the cabin wall. "Say that again, slow," he invited. "An when you get it out, you better pull yore gun!"

Cameron opened his mouth to speak but there came an interruption. There were four distinct metallic clicks. Someone gently cleared his throat and Lee Braid, with the others, looked toward the house. There was a shotgun thrust through the window. The throat was cleared gently again, and then came John Queen's hesitant voice.

"Ah . . . gentlemen . . ." said John Queen. "Ah . . . I would suggest that you leave."

York Cameron's head was thrust forward like the head of a chicken that sees a grain of corn. Pierre Deranleau's hand was stealing slowly upward. Lee Braid stopped that.

"Hold it, Deranleau!" he commanded. Deranleau let the hand go down.

"I noticed Mr. Deranleau, Mr. Braid," chided John Queen. "The gun, gentlemen. It is . . . ah . . . loaded with buckshot. I would suggest . . ." John Queen left the suggestion unfinished.

"The tracks I saw were right fresh, Cameron," said Lee Braid. "Mebbe you'd better follow them."

YORK CAMERON, speechless, reined his horse around. "Come on," he ordered. Pierre Deranleau likewise turned his horse. Babe Capes winked broadly at Lee Braid. Court Cameron looked at Molly Queen. He looked like a sick calf, thought Lee savagely. If she wanted a thing like that, she could have it! But Lee Braid couldn't see why a spirited girl like Molly Queen would want a worm that lay supinely by while his father blustered and swore at the girl he loved. Lee couldn't figure that. Buckles, the weathered Jug foreman, looked troubled. As he turned his horse, York Cameron and Deranleau were riding. Buckles followed them, and Capes and Court Cameron followed Buckles. Molly Queen sat down on the porch steps and buried her head in her hands. A sob shook her shoulders. John Queen, white hair awry, wandered through the front door. He was still carrying the shotgun.

"You came in pat, Mr. Queen," complimented Lee.

"Ah . . . yes . . ." answered John Queen. There was a whole lot the look of Ben Queen about the old man. He came down the steps, stumbled and dropped the shotgun. Lee sprang forward trying to catch the weapon. He was too late. The gun struck the ground. Lee snatched it up. A

hammer had dropped in the fall. Lee Braid snapped the shotgun open. The barrels were empty. He looked at John Queen.

"I . . . ah . . . meant to load it," apologized John Queen, looking over Lee's shoulders at the empty chambers. "Perhaps I forgot. That . . . ah . . . that must have been it."

Holding the shotgun Lee Braid sat down beside Molly. He felt mighty weak.

Quickly he regained his composure. He looked up at John Queen. "You oughtn't to overlook details like that," chided Lee Braid. "Don't you reckon you better take yore girl inside a while?"

John Queen, his arm about his daughter, entered the cabin. Lee Braid stayed out of the house. He puttered around the yard and the corrals, making work where there was none. He brought the Sharps from his room in the shed and kept it near at hand. At noon Lee went to the house. Molly had prepared dinner and was ready to put it on the table. The three ate in silence and when the meal was over Lee prepared to wash the dishes. Molly would have none of that and Lee went out into the yard again.

About one o'clock Molly Queen came out the back door. She walked over to Lee and stood silently surveying him for a moment. "I want to thank you," she said when she spoke.

"You got nothin' to thank me for," said Lee Braid. "It looks like yore daddy's the one to thank. He sure came in pat with that shotgun."

The girl shook her head. "Why are you staying here?" she asked suddenly.

"I'm workin' here," explained Lee Braid, patiently. "Yore dad's payin' me."

"You . . ." The girl was a little angry. She brushed back her hair with her hand and Lee saw a ring flash on her finger. "You needn't tell me if you don't want to," she concluded. "You're not just a cowboy. You. . . ."

"That makes me think," drawled Lee. "Whereabouts do your horses hang out? I went lookin' this mornin' but I couldn't find 'em. I'd like mighty well to run in the work team."

The girl looked from beneath long eyelashes. Was there something provocative in that look? Lee didn't know. "I'd ride with you and show you if I had a horse," she announced.

Lee thought that over. The horse that Molly rode had not joined Blue and the others in the creek. Evidently it had sought other companionship.

"I'll saddle Bill for you," offered Lee. "I can ride Blue."

He took Bill from the corral and went down to the creek while Molly returned to the house. When she came out Bill carried her saddle and Lee Braid was breathing a little swiftly.

"Blue don't like to be rode too well," he explained as she came up. They mounted and Lee overcame the recalcitrant Blue. He had already uncorked the horse but Blue was bound to hang his head and buck a few jumps. Lee looked mighty well as he rode Blue out. Lee knew it. That was why he had taken Blue instead of Brownie. Side by side they rode through the gap in the fence and under Molly's guidance, started down the creek.

THE two talked as they rode. Sure that her father would stay in the house while she was away, Molly Queen talked without restraint. Lee learned a lot about the Queens. He learned that John Queen had a brother, Ben, north on the Hondo, which was not exactly news. He learned how they had come to this country, how John Queen had given up the English chair in a little eastern college and determined to write a book. How they had picked the Humbug as their site and how they had filed at the land office. The cabin had been built for them by two men who had moved them into this country. The corrals and shed had been built at the

same time. Not much'd been done since.

Lee Braid mentioned Cameron to see what effect the name would have. Molly was bitter about Cameron. He had tried to make them relinquish their claims; he had been a bad neighbor. The occurrence of the morning was one of several. York Cameron, in Molly's estimation, was not a nice man at all.

The girl was particularly indignant concerning Cameron's treatment of Court. She seemed to know a lot about that. A lot more, Lee Braid thought, than a girl would know who had merely a passing interest in a man. Court Cameron, so Molly said, was definitely mistreated. Lee didn't say so, but he thought that the treatment was Court's own fault. He wondered about Molly Queen's ring.

Molly and Lee found the Queens' horses down the creek. There were four of them, a heavy team and two saddle horses. Picking up the horses the two started back to the cabin. On the way back Molly asked questions. They were answered but she didn't learn a great deal about Lee Braid.

It was three o'clock when they reached the cabin. Lee turned the horses into the corral and deciding it was too late to do much work, said that he would make hobbles for the horses so that they wouldn't drift when they were turned out. He also offered to grease Molly's saddle. It was a new saddle and very stiff. Molly thanked him and went into the house.

The hobbles made, Lee turned the horses out of the corral and watched them go to the creek. He took Molly's saddle to the shed, found the can of neatsfoot oil and went to work. While he worked John Queen came out and visited with Lee.

John Queen was in quest of information. He asked questions that were easy to answer, far different from his daughter's queries. John Queen wanted to know earmarks and brands. Lee answered the questions and drew pictures in the dust with a stick. After a time John Queen returned to the house.

Molly came out and called Lee when supper was ready. She walked to the house with him and waited while he washed for supper. The three sat down at the table together. It was a good meal. John Queen talked all through it. John Queen was filled with the plans for his book. From what he said it was to be a complete study of ranching. Lee, eating silently, thought that John Queen might have tackled a less imposing task. John Queen, in Lee's opinion, was hardly fitted for the work he had laid out. He didn't know enough, but he sure used beautiful language.

After the dishes were washed, Lee went out to his room in the shed. He was sitting on the step, smoking, when Molly Queen came out. She sat down beside him, cradled her chin in her hands and looked at the new moon that was rising over the hills.

Lee Braid didn't know a whole lot about women. He didn't know the meaning of that pensive attitude. Lee smoked his cigarette and rolled another. It was companionable sitting there. A fellow didn't have to talk and there was a soft, warm sort of aura about the shed step. After a while Molly Queen sighed, arose, and stood looking at Lee Braid.

"I'm going into the house," she said. "Father's in bed and it's time I was there."

"I reckon I'll set a while," said Lee.

Molly was silent for a moment, then she said, "Good night," and walked to the cabin.

Lee answered, "Good night," and puffed on his cigarette.

IT WAS lonesome when Molly had gone. Lee smoked a long time. The moon climbed and when Molly softly opened the back door and looked out she could see the moonlight and the little red

dot of Lee's cigarette glowing by the shed. Molly went to bed and to sleep. She smiled just a little before she slept. It was nice to feel safe. Nice to know that that lean, competent man, who didn't talk a lot with his mouth but whose eyes said things he didn't know they said, was sitting out there on watch, smoking, and Molly smiled again.

In the morning, after breakfast, Lee hitched the team to the wagon, and, putting the ax and the Sharps in the wagon box, pulled down the creek. He had located a stand of quaking asp and, while aspen is not the best wood in the world, Lee knew that he could get straight poles from those trees more easily than from any other. He did not plan to make any permanent structure at Queens', simply a pole fence that would turn back stock, a little horse pasture. If John Queen stayed with the place the day would come when he would haul in wire and put up a good fence. In the meantime a makeshift would do.

Lee cut two loads of poles before dinner. After dinner he returned to the aspen.

He had his third load cut and on the wagon and was about ready to pull out when both horses turned their heads and looked at the top of the slope where the aspens grew. That meant other horses were nearby and Lee Braid was suspicious of horses that he could not see. He took the Sharps and circled up the hillside under cover. When he topped the ridge he saw a rider pushing a little bunch of cattle along the canyon bottom. Lee Braid recognized the tall figure of Court Cameron.

Lee grinned. Evidently Nolly Gesche had recovered from his fright and had got word to Court concerning the heifers for which he had a sale. An idea possessed Lee. He wanted to know where Court was taking the cattle. The information might prove useful. Going back to the wagon Lee climbed to the seat, started his team and, poles rattling, went down to the creek and followed along it.

When he reached Queens' Lee let the team stand. His horses were in the creek bottom below the house and he took his rope and caught up Bill. Saddling, he rode away from Queens' at a lope.

The canyon that Court Cameron was following was behind Queens' cabin. Lee struck toward the east. He crossed three low bottoms and four ridges and, at the bottom of the fourth ridge found cattle sign. Lee went back up the ridge and, staying behind it, put Bill to moving.

When he had gone a mile he rode cautiously to the ridge top and looked over. The canyon below had widened into a park and on the far side of the park were aspens and pines. Lee saw a horse and rider disappearing into the trees. He waited for a time. After a while Court Cameron came out of the trees and rode off down the canyon, looking back occasionally. Court disappeared and still Lee waited. When he was sure that Cameron was not coming back he rode over the ridge, crossed the park and went up the slope on the other side. He circled the aspen thicket and found what he sought. There, well hidden from the canyon, was a little pole corral and in the corral were red and white Herefords.

Lee had decided to ride down and look the cattle over when he heard a horse coming in from below. Reining Bill back up the ridge, Lee tied the horse to a clump of bear grass and then crawled up to where he could see. As he peered down toward the corral, two hundred yards away, he saw a rider dismount and open the corral gate. The rider was Pierre Deranleau.

DERANLEAU, with the gate opened, mounted again, and riding into the corral pushed the cattle out to scatter in the aspen grove. Then, leaving the gate

open, Deranleau rode back down the canyon.

He was gone for a long time. Lee Braid waited, lying comfortably on his stomach, looking over the ridge. After a time Deranleau reappeared driving a bunch of cattle. These were big steers, twenty-five of them Lee counted. Deranleau penned the steers in the corral. Closing the gate he looked around and then, mounting once more, rode off down the canyon. Up on the ridge Lee Braid scratched his head.

He waited a while for Deranleau to come back with York Cameron. That would be Deranleau's idea, Lee was sure. When Deranleau did not reappear Lee took Bill and rode down to the corral. He looked over the steers. Every one carried a big Jug on its right ribs. Lee scratched his head again.

Court Cameron had penned a bunch of heifers to turn over to Nolly Gesche. Pierre Deranleau had turned the heifers loose and substituted Jug steers. If Deranleau had done that so that he could show York Cameron how his cattle were disappearing, why didn't he come back with York?

Then the idea flashed into Lee's mind. Deranleau knew that Court would turn the heifers over to Gesche. Deranleau planned to bring Cameron back so that he could see the actual transaction. That transaction would be at night, else why the Jug steers? A blind man would tell a heifer branded Forty-Four from a steer branded Jug. But not at night.

What was Deranleau's idea? Lee thought he knew that, too. He remembered the conversation he had overheard at the Jug line camp. Court Cameron had told Deranleau that he was through. Had told Deranleau to go tell old York. What had Court been through with? With helping Deranleau steal Jug cattle? What had he thought Deranleau would tell York? That he, Court, was stealing his own cattle. And Deranleau hadn't talked, but rather had chosen this method of throwing the blame for all the stealing, both Jug and Forty-Four, on Court's shoulders. It was going to be quite a party that night, when old York showed up and caught Court and Nolly Gesche.

But was it going to be a party? Molly Queen loved Court Cameron, and she was wearing a ring that must be his. Lee recalled what he had seen through the glasses. He swore a little. Why would a woman fall in love with Court Cameron? Why couldn't he just go ahead and take the medicine that was waiting for him?

But no, he couldn't, because Molly Queen loved him. He had put his arms about Molly Queen.

CHAPTER SIX

Sixgun Showdown

LEE BRAID got down and opened the corral gate. He remounted and pushed out the Jug steers, giving them a shove down the canyon. Turning Bill, he rode back to the aspens. He worked through the aspens and up the canyon and collected Forty-Four heifers. He got fifteen or twenty of them. He put them in the pen, closed the gate. Then, sure that he had done what he wanted to do, he started Bill for Queen's. He strung Bill out over the country. He had things to do.

When he reached Queen's the team was still standing in the yard. Lee unhooked the team and stripped off the harness. Turning the team loose, he rode down to the creek and picked up Brownie. Lee wanted a fresh horse. No telling how much riding there might be to do. Back in the yard he stripped the saddle from Bill and put it on Brownie. He stuck the Sharps in the saddle scabbard and got a lantern from his room in the shed. Tying the lantern to the saddle, Lee mounted

and rode toward the east. Lee had an appointment over to the east. He didn't know the exact hour of the appointment, but he didn't intend to be late.

Lee had hurried. He hadn't seen Molly Queen in the kitchen but Molly had seen him. She was filled with curiosity. Molly came out on the porch when Lee rode away. Bill, the moocher, came up to the porch coaxing for a litle sugar. Bill had begged for sugar before and gotten it. But this time, instead of sugar, a small, firm hand was tangled in his mane and Bill was led out to the saddle shed. Bill had a saddle slapped on his back and a small, slight body swung into the saddle. Bill started back over the trail he had just traversed.

Molly couldn't catch up to Lee Braid. She couldn't keep up with him. She had lost sight of Lee, but she knew the general direction he had taken. So did Bill. The sun lowered in the west and Molly's shadow was long before her, but she kept going. It was dark when she reached the ridge top and down below her she heard voices.

Lee Braid made it back to the corral in plenty of time. He chose a particularly thick clump of aspen interspersed with a few pines, and tied Brownie inside. He tied his neckerchief around Brownie's nose to keep the horse from whinnying, and he took the lantern off the saddle. Then he went through the trees until he could see the corral. He waited. The sun went down and it was dark in the aspens. Still Lee waited. After a time he heard a horse coming in from the east. That would be Nolly Gesche. Gesche went to the corral and stopped.

Then another horse came up the canyon. And over to Lee's right an aspen rustled and wood snapped. Lee heard Court Cameron say, "There's twenty-five in the corral, Nolly."

He heard Nolly Gesche reply, "I could have used fifteen or twenty more."

Then he heard old York Cameron yelling at his kid.

"You damn' thief!"

A horse started away from the corral and guns roared, but the horse kept on going. Nolly Gesche was clear. Horses crashed through the aspens and converged on the corral. Men yelled and a lantern blossomed into light, then it was still except for old York Cameron. Lee Braid, carrying his unlit lantern, started toward the corral.

He came up behind the group. They didn't hear him. They were listening to York Cameron. The lantern light flashed from the faces of York Cameron and Court Cameron and Babe Capes and Buckles and from the smooth, brown cheeks of Pierre Deranleau.

"Stealin' my catle!" York Cameron roared. "Stealin' cattle from yore father because of a girl. You ain't worth killin'. I'm goin' to take you in an' find out who yore pardner was, an' then I'm goin' to send you to the pen an' you can stay there!"

"The cattle in the pen are Jug steers, Mr. Cameron," said Deranleau smoothly. "I thought that something. . . ."

A voice said: "That's a damn' lie!" With a start Lee Braid realized that he had spoken.

MIRACULOUSLY the circle opened. Buckles was holding the lantern high and Lee Braid was facing York Cameron and Pierre Deranleau. Cameron's mouth opened wide. A torrent of words was ready to pour from that mouth but Lee Braid's voice went on, remorselessly reading a damning indictment.

"You call yore kid a thief," said Lee Braid. "He never stole, but you made him take his own cattle because you wouldn't let him out from under yore thumb. Deranleau thinks them are Jug cattle because he put 'em there, but they're Forty-Four heifers. Every one of 'em.

Court can sell his own cattle. He ought to sell 'em all an' cut loose from you, Cameron. A man that treats his own kid like you treat Court, don't deserve to have a kid."

"You . . ." began York Cameron, looking at Lee.

Again Lee's voice, without his volition, cut in. "A man that will hire a killer is a snake, Cameron," said Lee Braid, "but the killer is worse than the snake. Deranleau's rustled yore cattle, Cameron. He tried to kill Queen."

Pierre Deranleau took a step forward. His hand was flashing up toward his armpit as he moved, and motion for motion, Lee Braid matched him. The lantern glowed and men stood stock still beside the corral. Then two guns bellowed and Pierre Deranleau was thrown back against the corral poles by a giant, unseen hand.

Lee Braid stood still for a moment, his smoking gun held just in front of him. He looked down at the gun and at the man on the ground. Deranleau lay quiet. As Lee looked, Deranleau kicked once, convulsively, and that was all.

Lee Braid looked at York Cameron. "Take yore kid, Cameron. Take yore kid an' go home an' treat him like a man."

Lee Braid stepped back, away from the lantern. To his left was the dark shadow of the aspens. Lee went toward them.

He stopped at the edge of the aspens and waited. He heard his name called but did not answer. He heard Cameron and Buckles and Capes talking. He heard Court Cameron. Then men went for horses and brought them back. In the lantern light Lee saw a limp body lifted and placed on a horse. He heard his name called again and then leather creaked and men mounted. The lantern no longer glowed and horses moved down the hillside toward the canyon bottom. After a while Lee Braid found a match and lit his own lantern. He would find Brownie and go home.

The lantern moved through the trees like a firefly as Lee Braid made for the horse. He had almost reached the clump where Brownie stood when he heard his name called again.

"Lee! Lee!" It was Molly Queen.

Lee turned and said, "Here." A soft body struck against him. Warm arms were thrown around his neck. Lee dropped the lantern and it went out. Lee's hand stroked soft hair and the girl sobbed against him. "It's all right," said Lee Braid awkwardly. "He's safe."

After a time the sobbing ceased. After a time the arms were taken from Lee's neck and Molly Queen stepped away. Lee Braid said, prosaically enough but with a hopeless shake in his voice, "Let's get the horses and go home."

Lee Braid helped Molly mount. He wanted to ask her why she had come. He

wanted to ask her what she had heard and seen. But he refrained. He mounted Brownie and holding the lantern led the way through the quaking asp and down the canyon. It would be best to follow the canyon to the creek and then up the creek to the cabin. Lee Braid led the way.

THERE was light in Queen's cabin when they came in. There were two men on the porch. Lee heard a familiar, booming voice.

"I told you she'd be all right, John," boomed Ben Queen. "I said Lee would bring her in."

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Lee dismounted before the cabin and helped Molly Queen dismount. Molly was in John Queen's arms, then. Ben Queen was pummeling Lee on the back and booming about how he had finished with the hay and taken a train to Larre and driven out from town to see his brother.

"I told John that the girl was all right," Ben Queen said again. "I told him that she was with you an' that you'd look after her. How come you never delivered my letter to John, kid?"

"I lost it," said Lee, his voice tired, "and—"

"What's the mater?" demanded Ben Queen, anxiously. "You hurt? What's the matter, kid?"

"I'm tired, Ben," answered Lee Braid. "I—"

"What happened?" Ben Queen's voice was stern.

"I reckon," said Lee simply, "that I killed Pierre Deranleau, Ben. I'm goin' to put up the horses."

Ben Queen let him go. Ben Queen followed Molly and John Queen to the porch and listened while Molly told what she had seen and heard at the corral, while Molly's voice changed gradually from sobs to a timbre of pride. Ben Queen slapped his leg and swore a resounding oath when the story was done.

"I'm goin' to hunt the kid," he vowed. "Whereabouts is he?"

"I'll find him," offered Molly. "I'll find him and bring him back, Uncle Ben."

She went down from the porch.

Lee Braid, after unsaddling Brownie and Bill, rolled a cigarette and sat on the step of the saddle room, his cigarette glowing red in the night. Lee Braid was thinking, his thoughts racing in a circle that began and ended with Molly Queen. Recollection of violence at the corral were set aside. He was thinking about Molly

Queen and Court Cameron. He could pull out now that Ben Queen was here. He puffed his smoke.

There was a step on the soft earth beside the shed and someone slid down and came to rest beside Lee. Lee moved away. A small hand tucked under Lee's arm. It was warm there, warm and firm and very, very small. Molly Queen said, "Lee?"

"Tonight," said Molly Queen, "you did that for me, didn't you? Because you thought I liked Court Cameron."

"Yes." The cigarette made a glowing arc in the night as Lee tossed it away.

The hand nestled closer against his side. "I felt sorry for Court," said Molly Queen, dignity in her voice.

"You got a ring," Lee Braid said dully.

"That was my mother's ring." The hand was withdrawn. "I put it on—I put it on because—Uncle Ben wants you, Lee."

Lee Braid reached out long, strong arms. There was no resisting those arms, and Molly Queen didn't try to resist. Molly Queen's head rested against Lee Braid's breast. The moon came up over the pines on the hill and its light showed on her upturned face.

Out on the front porch Ben Queen spoke to his brother.

"Lee Braid is the salt of the earth," said Ben Queen, positively. "I've fixed it so that he'll have what I got when I die. You an' Molly come north to the Hondo with me, John, an' we'll turn the place over to Lee an' you an' me'll write that book."

"Ah . . ." said John Queen.

Ben Queen stirred restlessly. "I wonder what's keeping those kids?" he said. "I'm goin' to get 'em."

John Queen's hand stopped his brother. There was no hesitancy as John Queen spoke. "No, Ben," he said, "Leave them alone for awhile."

THE END

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(Continued from page 101)

"What then shall I do—go to him?"

"Later we can figure that out. I've come for you now, to go with me. You said that, second to Tony, I was yore choice. Don't that put me first now, Maria?"

"That would not be fair to Tony—so soon!"

"I think he might want it that way," whispered Kooly, and wondered miserably if, after all, he was not speaking the truth. Tony, dead, would want it that way!

He dismounted and stood beside Maria and in the flickering candlelight she turned trustfully to his arms. Although the sincerity of her grief almost shook him in his stubborn resolve, he kissed her on the lips, but she gave no response. Finally, when her grief had spent itself, she said, "I will kiss you, now, but close, please, your eyes!"

Close, please, your eyes! A simple request, but even through his befogged senses its import rang clear. While her face was yet upturned he released her. "Maybe," he said slowly, "I can still straighten things out, the way you really want 'em in yore heart, Maria. Maybe I spoke too quick, an' it'll be all right about Tony comin' back. Just don't you worry, honey." A moment later she heard the beat of hoofs.

With his pony in full stride, and the extra horse thudding along at a straining rein, Kooly came at last upon Tuck on his way to Dead Pine. In the bright moonlight the gambler recognized him, and, sensing an ominous purpose to Kooly's haste, reached quickly for his pistols, but not quickly enough, and that gave excellent material for the subsequent inscription:

HERE LIES
TWO-GUN TUCK
HE SLOWED DOWN

IT WAS daybreak when Kooly got back to Dutchman's Luck, and the false-fronted little town looked naked in the cool, gray dawn. Down the street, at the all-night restaurant, a swinging oil lamp still flickered feebly, and the Widow Kent was just going off duty. She looked tired, he thought, and he drew rein and smiled.

"I was sorry to hear about yore old man," he said. "He was all right."

At this rough sympathy she dabbed her eyes with a wisp of handkerchief, and, coming forward, laid a friendly hand on the withers of his horse. "I was a fool, Jed," she said contritely, "but, honestly, a harmless one. Cren knew that before he passed on."

"I'm powerful glad o' that. I got an extry hoss here, lemme give you a lift to yore quarters."

He helped her to mount and rode beside her. "Going away?" she asked.

"Yeah, there ain't nothin' to hold me here."

"I wish I were going. It's tough here for a lone woman."

After a while he said, "Yeah, I imagine." The glint of the rising sun on her red hair was really pretty, he thought. She was awful young to be a widow.

They passed out of the town and came into a trail winding through towering pines, fragrant in the cool dampness of the morning. The trail was freshly cut with the marks of wheels and, far ahead, in the morning stillness, he could hear the faint, familiar sounds of a wagon train in motion. Without knowing why he was completely at peace with the world.

"Where are you going?"

"Headin' east, I reckon," he answered, and then it occurred to him that, long since, they must have passed her stopping place. "Say, where you goin'?" he blurted.

"With you—if it's all right," she said simply, and he answered, as simply, that it was all right.

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(Continued from page 8)

he lived on the northern Red River and gave that locale as his birthplace. All of which looked like the well-known run-around, and belied his name.

That he was a scholar seems to be borne out by his familiarity with English and French, as well as several of the Indian tongues.

Although not a chief among his tribesmen, he was powerful and his word carried much weight among the six thousand warriors of the Sioux nation. When it came to making medicine for big undertakings with such lesser chieftains as Gall, Broad Tail and Rain-in-the-Face, he usually had the last word, and the big chiefs, Crazy Horse and Red Cloud, listened to his counsel.

Contrary to popular opinion, Sitting Bull stayed in his tent and "made medicine" while Gall, his rival, led the fight against Custer. He was the power behind the throne, "the oracle of mysteries, and of knowledge hidden from the masses."

Even during the excitement of battle his large features were reposeful and always calm.

After the Battle of the Little Big Horn, he fled to Canada, but was later permitted to return to his old home on the Grand River, where he lived quietly, his medicine-making days at an end. Later, because of his friendship for Annie Oakley, famous woman sharpshooter, he was persuaded to join Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and toured the country with it for some years.

His end came in 1891, when Federal authorities, with the asssistance of Indian police, attempted to arrest him for instigating ghost dances in which the red men died of their violent exertions. A violent and bitter battle took place in which he was killed.

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